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Boston Herald: "Mr. Zangwill is certainly a brilliant *farceur*, but he is something more. There is even pathos to be found in some chapters of his book, and there is wealth of epigram and satire. There is, too, an audacity of invention that must distinguish this from the majority of 'funny' books. 'Hamlet up to Date' is a short story of marked originality. I am not sure it is not my favourite chapter; but then I recall 'The Fall of Israfel,' and I cannot decide which I like better. At any rate, here is a humorist of the first rank, not born, as we are wont to suppose humorists must all be, under the Stars and the Stripes."—*Louise Chandler Moulton.*

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New York Tribune: "A work of quite ravishing piquancy, which is creating a *furore* in New York."

Geo, Hutchinson. Dec, 91.

I MET HIM IN THE ATLANTIC AND CONGRATULATED HIM.—P. 217.

The
Celibates' Club

BEING THE UNITED STORIES OF

The Bachelors' Club
AND
The Old Maids' Club

BY

I. ZANGWILL

AUTHOR OF 'THE MASTER,'
'DREAMERS OF THE GHETTO,'
ETC. ETC.

LONDON
WILLIAM HEINEMANN
1898

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A LAST FOREWORD.

It was inevitable that the Bachelors' Club and the Old Maids' Club should one day be united, and that the banns should be published by my publisher in ordinary. They are able to live more cheaply together than apart, which is, perhaps, some excuse for their union. It only remains for me to pronounce a paternal benediction, to hope that they may continue bound together, for better or for worse, cancelling each other's faults and enhancing each other's virtues, doubling the profits, and halving the losses, till death doth them part, or—more probably—consign them to a common oblivion.

I. Z.

July 1898.

THE BACHELORS' CLUB

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY GEORGE HUTCHINSON

> '*A slavery beyond enduring,*
> *But that 'tis of their own procuring.*
> *As spiders never seek the fly,*
> *But leave him of himself t' apply;*
> *So men are by themselves employed,*
> *To quit the freedom they enjoyed,*
> *And run their necks into a noose,*
> *They'd break 'em after to break loose.*'
>
> HUDIBRAS.

> '*A man may have a quarrel to marry when he will.*'
>
> BACON'S ESSAYS.

PREFACE TO THE SIXTH EDITION

Since this unpretentious book has reached a sixth edition, it is plain that my fear lest it should make only one reader laugh and have been written wholly in vain, was unfounded. Among the readers who have laughed—I have been pleased to learn from 'unsolicited testimonials'—may be counted leading humorists of the English-speaking world. Either, then, the book must have some merit as an essay in comedy, or the eminent humorists must be—jesters. There are pages in it which I myself find rather forced, and in the Continental edition I have revised away a whole chapter; but I have not ventured to take such liberties with the text in England, where many people foolishly prefer that chapter to any other, and so I have confined myself to the correction of three or four clerical or printer's errors. In the couple of years that have elapsed since the book was kindly welcomed by the press and the public alike, there has been an amusing reaction among the critics against any humour that is new. As they do not seem to care for the old humour either—the humour of the pun, the pothouse, the police-court, and the pawnshop—one is driven to conclude that humour itself is under a ban. This is very serious. The age was sad enough already. It is hard for *Figaro* to be deprived of the relief of laughter, and to be compelled to weep always. He must needs laugh, if only at the critics, and in the privacies of his sleeve. They are, in sooth, excellent fun—these austere gentlemen—to any writer with a sense of humour, who does not mind being misunderstood, and has no anile sensitiveness about his reputation, and can afford to bide his time, doing his best as the heart in him pleases, and content to be eliminated if his best is not fit to survive. For my part, I have been grieved to see more than one of my fellow-authors morbidly anxious to cover up their humorous past, in deference to the conventional opinion that the gravity of the owl is a sign of wisdom. Too many writers hasten to assume the statue in their own lifetime, and to compose their public features to a non-human frigidity. But the premature pedestal does not always prove sustaining, for to be non-human is not to be immortal; it is your Martin Tuppers and your University prigs who never descend to a jest, not your Shakespeares and Heines. 'Let us be serious, here comes a fool!' exclaimed a divine in danger of being caught disporting himself boyishly. 'Let us be serious, here comes a critic!' the modern author is tempted to exclaim. For the stock critic, with that suburban insight of his, cannot understand that a serious man may be humorous, still less that a humorous man is always serious. Literature has taught the critic that lesson *ad nauseam*, but he never acquires the lesson, only the nausea. A high-class paper praises my tragedy and sneers at my comedy. When I was younger and cruder I wrote for that paper pseudonymously, and it was eager to get my humorous work. Other superior organs have congratulated me on the development of my art and style, as displayed in *Ghetto Tragedies*; they have rejoiced to see me evolve from the humorous. It seems ungracious after their fine compliments to confess that the bulk of that little book was not only written but published (under the name of the 'Baroness von S.') years before *The Bachelors' Club* was opened by the first reader. It has always been a great consolation to me in the troubles and throes of authorship, and especially in the pessimistic periods of humorous composition, to read the newspaper comments on my books and my person; and it is mainly because I have heartily enjoyed them all, and have never once been goaded into contradicting a critic, not even when he has praised me on wrong grounds, or described me as five feet high, that I venture humbly to claim the title of humorist.

I. ZANGWILL.

CAUTION

In writing *The Bachelors' Club* I have not so much had in view the public interest as my own. While I have carefully endeavoured to free the book from anything instructive, I have not shrunk from making it amusing, even at the risk of being taken seriously; and if I succeed in making only one reader laugh, I shall have written wholly in vain. The subject of the work is one that is full of interest, especially to readers of either sex, and I venture to hope that I have treated it as well as it deserves. The book is hereby dedicated to the bachelors and maidens of the world, in the hope that they will each buy a copy, and recommend its purchase to their married friends. It may be as well to state that the work does not libel any of the existing Bachelors' Clubs in particular, but all the others. An index to the jokes is in preparation and will be forwarded to all professional humourists on application, in writing, to the publishers. Some of these jokes have already appeared in *Ariel*, and I have to thank myself for my kind permission to reproduce them. I regret there should be some puns amongst them, as they will be a difficulty to the Chinese translator, but he may rely on my cordial co-operation. I have also to apologise to my critics for this book not being some other book, though it shall not occur again, as my next book will be. In conclusion, I have to acknowledge my indebtedness to my friend and fellow-Bachelor, Mr. M. D. Eder, for numerous valuable suggestions. Whatever the reader or the critic does not like in this work Mr Eder suggested.

I. Z.

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THE BACHELORS' CLUB

PROLOGUE

OF THE BACHELORS, THEIR BELIEFS AND BY-LAWS

THE BACHELORS' CLUB was a Club in which all the members, without exception, were Bachelors. But this was its only eccentricity. The Committee rightly thought that they had sacrificed enough to oddity in excluding persons who were willing to subscribe to the exchequer of the Club, but not to its principles. The principles of the Club may be summed up in its axiom that marriage was a crime against woman for which no punishment, not even exclusion from the Club, could be sufficiently severe. The conditions of membership were four. No member must follow a profession involving celibacy. No member must have ever had a disappointment in love. No member must be under thirty. No duly-elected member must use a latch-key.

It was incumbent upon all candidates to deposit with the Secretary two independent certificates of non-marriage, each signed by a householder (married) who had known the candidate from his cradle; and, furthermore, to make oath that they held the marriages of other men, and especially of their fathers, to be failures. The respectable married householder had to fill up a printed blue form, containing the following six questions:—

1. What is the full name of the candidate?
2. What is his age?
3. How long have you known him?
4. Has there ever been any matrimony, or tendency to matrimony, in his family?
5. Has he ever had a disappointment in love?
6. Is his celibacy compulsory?

No. 3 was rather a trap, as by a simple comparison of the replies to it and to No. 2, the Secretary could ascertain whether the certifier had really known the candidate from the cradle. Some babies are so precocious that one cannot be too careful.

In the early editions of the Celibate Catechism, which were preserved in the annals of the Club, No. 5 ran simply, "Has he ever been married?" But the inadequacy of this was early perceived. Though a candidate had never committed matrimony, he might have committed himself in other ways to the matrimonial heresy. "Has he ever been in love?" was tried and found even less comprehensive, plausible as it looked at first sight. A negative answer, it was perceived, by no means excluded the possibility of the candidate having married any number of times and women, whether in Oriental simultaneity or in Occidental sequence. The form finally chosen, "Has he ever had a disappointment in love?" was thought to cover every possible case whether of incipient or developed matrimony in the candidate's past. If a man had loved but had not married, the disappointment in love was obvious. If he had loved and *had* married, the disappointment in love was more obvious still. Thus it will be seen that the Bachelors spared no trouble to confine the privileges of the Club to gentlemen who had a clean record, and whose escutcheon was free from the suspicion of their having ever had honourable intentions towards any woman whatsoever. The sixth question furthermore ensured that they were Bachelors out of pure love. Priests, junior bank-clerks, and others are sometimes required to remain single, and in such celibacy there is obviously no virtue.

As for the provision against the use of latch-keys, every member had to give his word of honour that, in the event of his refusing to go home till morning, he would always on arrival knock or ring, or do both, if so requested by the device on the door-post. The reason for fixing the age of Bachelorhood, in the esoteric sense, at thirty was based upon the scientific fact that celibacy in earlier years is too common to be the touchstone of an elevated soul. It had been originally determined to frame a condition to exclude those who had ever taken part in the marriage-ceremony, but on reflection it was decided not to keep the best men out of the Club, nor to fail in respect for the Cloth.

Should the various documents, oaths, and assurances be satisfactory, a matter on which the Secretary reported before a General Court of members, the candidate was permitted to be seconded for election. No member was ever "proposed," as the word was held too redolent of evil associations. As soon as a candidate was seconded, he paid his entrance fee and his annual subscription, and became entitled temporarily to the privileges of the Club, including a vote. As the presence of one white ball amid the black was held to constitute sufficient desire on the part of the Club for the new recruit, the candidate was generally elected.

Connected with the Club was a small Benefit-Society. By paying a trifle extra with their monthly subscription, members could insure their single lives. The treasurer and actuary, Moses Fitz-Williams, whose second cousin had been a senior optime, had drawn up tables showing the average duration of the male single life; but as the ordinary agamo-biological statistics were considerably modified by the superior single vitality of the members, the sum assured to be paid on marriage was very large in proportion to the instalments. Thus the unfortunate wife of a departed bachelor received a very pretty penny in compensation. In practice the scheme did not work well. Just as some heavily insured husbands generously die for the benefit of their widows, so one or two Bachelors quixotically married for the benefit of their wives. It did not happen often, for such generosity is rare; but it was a difficulty. The very first night I visited the Club, Felix O'Roherty had a motion on the paper recommending the invalidation of the policy in cases of wilful matrimony, just as suicide rendered ordinary life-assurance null and void. Out of respect for O'Roherty it was referred to the Executive Committee, and so it passed decently into oblivion. I may as well mention here that the rules regulating the admission of visitors were two, and two only :—

1. No married gentleman admitted.
2. No unmarried lady admitted.

It was plain that if married men were admitted, the virgin purity of the atmosphere and its freedom from the reeks of domesticity would be threatened, while if unmarried ladies were allowed access to the symposia, the single-mindedness of the members might be impugned, and their attentions misconstrued into intentions. Of course the advisability of admitting ladies was never for a moment in question. It was universally felt that to isolate themselves from the society of woman was the surest means of shrouding her in a halo; just as, on the other hand, free communion with her was the safest prophylactic against affection. Nevertheless, in spite of the exclusion of their husbands ladies rarely availed themselves of the opportunity of visiting that unknown animal, the Bachelor, in his native haunts.

To distinguish the waiters from the members, who many a morning turned up in evening dress, it was insisted upon that they should belong to the lower caste of married men. The head waiter owed his supremacy over the rest of the staff to having served a term of years for bigamy, though, on the other hand, the rest of the staff had the consolation of feeling that *he* was nearer to the bachelor caste than his superior. The steward was a dusky Indian who had married at the age of three.

The apartments of the Club were situated in Leicester Square, so that the Alhambra and the Empire music-halls were within easy walk, at least during the early part of the evening. When conversation languished at the Club for scarcity of members, the few faithful Bachelors frequently repaired in a body to these temples of the ballet to save the gas and the fires, only going back to the Club that night if they picked up sufficient members at the temples to make it worth while. In many cases the fortunate waiters (who were expected to sleep on the building, and did so at every opportunity) had the Club to themselves for hours together—although these hours of idleness were usually small.

The premises were neither palatial nor inadequate. They consisted of two rooms, communicating with each other by rather loud remarks. The one you entered first, if you had been careful to ascend two flights of stairs instead of one, was the smoking-room; but the members always smoked in the other and smaller room, because a pipe was more of a luxury there on account of the placard proclaiming "No smoking allowed."

As all the Bachelors were members of the Anti-Anti-Tobacco League, and were never without a pipe or cigar in their mouths, except when brushing their teeth of a morning, and as the cosy little room also contained the bar, it came about that the better half of the Club was always deserted by the members—as was perhaps only consistent.

It was, however, generally occupied by the waiters, who retired there not to be in the way when members were getting their drinks from the bar. This was rather hard upon the poor married fellows on account of the misogamous texts with which the walls of the room were hung. Fortunately custom dulls the edge of environment; else the revised Decalogue, in which "Thou shalt not marry" replaced the more conventional form of the Seventh Commandment, might have procured them incessant conscience-ache. In time they bore with equanimity the most hateful aphorisms; and occasionally dusted them. These dogmas were the work of the secretary, Mandeville Brown. Here are the worst of them :—"*There is nothing half so sweet in life as the awakening from Love's young dream.*" "*Marriage is egotism on a sociable; bachelorhood altruism on a bicycle.*" "*At seventeen a woman's heart is affected, at twenty-seven her affection.*" "*Merit makes the man and 'Worth' the woman.*" "*Man proposes and woman poses.*" "*Love is the only excuse for marriage; and it is not an excuse that will wash or wear well.*" "*You can give your heart to a woman for life, but who can guarantee that she will not lose it?*" "*The truest chivalry to the woman who loves you is to leave her a spinster.*" "*A love-marriage is a contradiction in terms.*" "*Marriage is a sacrament of souls and a profession for women.*" "*Good conduct may lessen the term of other life-sentences, but bad conduct is the only curtailer of marriage.*" "*Marriage is a man-trap.*" "*There are three things which every good wife detests in her secret heart—tobacco, a faithful income-tax return, and her husband.*" "*The only true love is love at first sight; second sight dispels it.*" "*Love cannot be bought or sold; traffic requires realities.*" "*Marriages are made in heaven; but this brand is not exported.*" "*Genius should only marry genius; and no woman is a genius.*" "*Marriage is as fatal to the higher life as the higher life is fatal to marriage.*"

By the very conditions of the Higher Bachelorhood few of these articles of faith could have been the legitimate offspring of experience. Hence the veneration in which they were held by the sect. They were sacred and beyond inquiry: a precious heirloom to be handed down from Bachelor to somebody else's son in holy apostolic succession. Another mural ornament deserves mention. It was a sort of fresco, consisting of a great black-edged oval, on either side of which flew allegorical figures of Diana and Tolstoï, weeping; at the head was inscribed in sombre letters the words "Here lied," which surmounted the names of the married and gone apostates. A small proportion of the space was filled; for the Club had naturally been a little unsettled in its origin. Now, however, that it had steadied itself we felt sure that it would maintain its equilibrium, and that the gaps would be left for ever gaping.

There were only twelve Bachelors. The Club was foolishly superstitious, and dreaded the fatal presage of matrimony if ever thirteen of the members should be present at once. Limiting their number to twelve effectually blocked this possibility.

I need not say that these twelve men (or eleven, to affect modesty) were considerably above the average in intellect. That is implied in the fact of their membership. When I joined the Club (which was on the 31st of December, some six months or so after its formation), it was constituted as follows:—

Andrew M'Gullicuddy, *Founder and President.*
Moses Fitz-Williams, *Treasurer.*
Mandeville Brown, *Hon. Sec.*

These three formed the Committee. The others were—

Osmund Bethel,
Eliot Dickray,
Joseph Fogson, M.D., B.Sc.,
Oliver Green,
Israfel Mondego,
Henry Robinson,
Felix O'Roherty,
Caleb Twinkletop,

and, last but not least, myself. Of these self-chosen spirits, several had won celebrity, or lost it, in literature, science, or art. Most of those who had done neither were trying to. We were all full of humour—good and bad; for when the wine was in the wit was out and could not be restrained. Though some of us were poor, and two of us were old, the majority were well-to-do and in their prime to boot. As a rule our hearts were light and our pockets heavy, and we took no care for the morrow beyond staying up for it. The New Year dawned upon no merrier dozen than that which quaffed the cup of good-fellowship and puffed the pipe of peace, and vowed eternal friendship and celibacy in those dear and expensive old rooms in Leicester Square.

Strange to say, I owed my chance of election to the duodecimal system which prevailed at the Club, for it indirectly opened the door to the ejection of Willoughby Jones, into whose shoes I stepped. Poor Willoughby! You may read of his crime in the matrimonial columns of the *Daily Wire*; but what drove him to it has never before picked its way into print.

Willoughby Jones had got the idea that if twelve good men and true could be packed into a box, a room was quite enough for a Bachelors' dozen. So he seconded a motion that the large room be sublet, and the staff of waiters and the subscription be reduced by one-half. Those who were present have told me, individually and in confidence, that they will never forget the indignation with which this secondation was received by the others; though, speaking for themselves, it seemed eminently reasonable. They were not, however, the men to go against the sentiment of the majority, and declared hotly that the dignity of the Club required at least two rooms to spread itself over. Besides, as the only way to the inner room lay through the outer, it was felt that, when the tenant moved in, grave complications might ensue, especially if he were domesticated or a musician. Poor Willoughby tried hard to argue that if the tenant were a musician, he would probably be an Italian, so that there would be no necessity for him to practise his revolutionary music at home; but he had a weak case. As for lowering the subscriptions, the Bachelors unanimously thought the others thought such an idea could only occur to a low-minded fellow, who might be expected to turn recreant some day; and they did not hesitate to express one another's opinions. The fiery cross-eyed Moses Fitz-Williams openly taxed him with flabby convictions; whereupon the unfortunate young man lost his head and defied them all, and confessed that he had cherished the grand passion all along, and was looking about in his spare hours for a woman to fit it on to. It was a scene to be remembered, and the atmosphere was tense with emotion. Willoughby Jones stood with his curly head thrown back in the attitude of Ajax defying the telegraph wires; or an early Christian Father (if you can call a Bachelor a Christian Father) inviting the Lions to breakfast. For a moment the members were paralysed. It was as if a Government bomb-shell had fallen at their feet and then exploded. Being Bachelors, they were not used to being defied and having their sacred emotions trampled upon. They opened their mouths, but nothing issued from their lips, except their pipes, which fell unheeded on the floor. At last a member was sent to fetch the President, who was unfortunately absent in the hour of crisis. After a long and fruitless search, it struck the envoy that M'Gullicuddy might be at home; where indeed he was, and in his beauty sleep. But he rose to the occasion and drove to the Club; where he at once prescribed marriage or the payment of the arrears of Willoughby's subscription. Willoughby's eye was seen to light up, as though it were a member in the room where smoking was not allowed, but he said nothing except that anything was preferable to being out of debt. When it was too late, the Bachelors remembered that he was heavily insured. Later in the day, about 9 A.M. to be precise, a lady was hunted up by the accommodating head-waiter. It was the lady who had denounced him for marrying another lady before her, and had thus procured him five years of state-supported celibacy. Against her he had long cherished an unreasonable grudge. Everything comes to him who waits, so the head-waiter was at last rewarded by seeing his widow, by a former marriage, married off to the owner of the unattached grand passion. When the curly locks he had thrown back were entirely a memory, Willoughby pleaded hard to be allowed to rejoin the Club; but the rules were inexorable. He, however, found salvation by a side-door; for, the by-laws admitting married men as waiters, Willoughby donned his dress suit and installed himself in the outer chamber, where, as nobody ever interfered with him, and he was never called upon to execute an order, he grew in time to be indistinguishable from the other waiters, and the members forgot that he had ever occupied the social position of a Bachelor. He soon got reconciled to seeing his name under the funereal "Here lied," and as the Club hours were from sunrise to sunset and *vice versa*, he settled the assurance money upon the head-waiter's first widow, and was regular and punctual in the discharge of his Club duties, highly satisfied with retaining a position in the Bachelors' Club and cheerfully continuing to neglect his subscription in lieu of salary. But from that day to this no member of the Bachelors' Club has ever cherished the grand passion, whether for woman in the abstract or ladies in the concrete.

Which is a record to be proud of.

CHAPTER I.

THE SECOND TICKET.

THERE was always something about me which invited confidence. It was my tongue. When I saw a Bachelor (the capital "B" always denotes the esoteric Bachelor) walking about with a wobegone air, or a new necktie, or taking his drinks irregularly, I made it a point to sympathise with him. It is only thus that I can account for the fact that I was the solitary recipient of the confidences of nearly every member in turn. Osmund Bethel once said that I was the dustbin for the ashes of everybody's past. But then Osmund always affected cheap epigram, and even that at other people's expense. But let me not speak ill of him. He is beyond our censure now.

Little Bethel they called him at the Club; not because he ever had any Methodism in his madness, but because they did not like to set themselves up against the inevitable. Little Bethel was a tall, handsome fellow, with a mass of tawny hair and a pair of sunny eyes. He carried his head high, and a Malacca cane, but that was before the days of his prosperity. No happier journalist breathed or lied in England than Little Bethel till the day when Slateroller, the dramatic critic of the *Whirlpool*, died suddenly at a *matinée* of a new play, and the editor called Osmund into the sanctum, and asked him if he would care for the reversion of the post. Osmund's heart gave a great jump, for he felt that this was a great leap forwards for him. He had hitherto been a mere reporter, whose duties were to attend company meetings and review ethical treatises, but he always knew he was cut out for a dramatic critic, because of his contempt for Slateroller and his reluctance to struggle for a seat at the pit-door. It was true that on the only occasion he had understudied Slateroller, he had shown such unstudied antipathy to Slateroller's past record, that the poor man had to spend the next day in writing letters of apology and explanation to his friends, and that he, Osmund, was sent ignominiously back to his ethical treatises. But there must have been something in that article—else, why should the editor have sent for him now ?

Osmund went to his apartment that night in a hansom, and gave his landlady notice. His heart swelled with joyous expectation. He had always loved the drama ; and now his passion for plays was to be requited. He would see three hundred a year at nothing a month. He would be able to bask gratis in the rays of the sacred Lamp of Burlesque ; and to gaze freely into the eyes of Melpomene. He saw himself one of the critics, ranged neatly in their stalls, who are pointed out, not in scorn, by the finger of the pittite ; a first-nighter mingling easily with the rank and beauty and fashion that attend *premières* for nothing but the love of the drama. He saw obsequious managers asking him for plays, and timorous dramatists inviting him to drink. But this was not all.

The question of marriage had always troubled Osmund greatly. Life had always been a hard fight to him ; it was as much as he could do to exist on the earnings of a reporter. He led but an insipid, lonely life in his apartment, and in spite of the occasional delights of the Bachelors' Club, it was natural he should sometimes feel a longing to marry. Now, however, he was a comparatively well-to-do man; his salary had gone up £95 a year, and he realised with joy that he was at last in a position not to marry. No; there would be no necessity for him now to be false to his principles, no temptation for him to be untrue to the Bachelors' Club, for the sake of marrying a woman of means or drawing his assurance money. In the straits of poverty, the sturdiest soul may stumble and fall; and Little Bethel's soul could not help knowing that it resided in a shapely body. But, Heaven be thanked! the matrimonial Satan was for ever behind him henceforwards.

It is plain that Osmund was afflicted with a conscience. When a man suffers from a conscience, you never know where he will end. But for Osmund's conscience his story might have ended here.

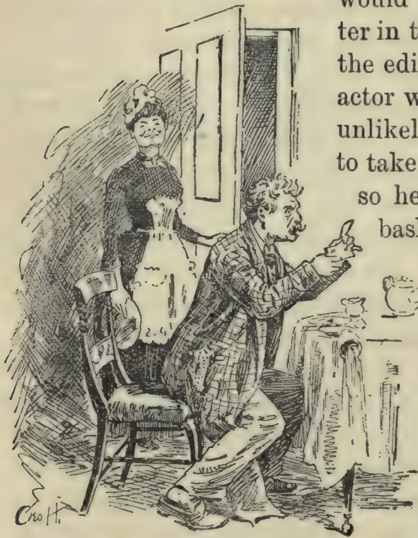
The first ticket he got was a stall for the first night of a Shakespearian production at the *Lymarket*, and Osmund felt a proud and happy critic. He was a little damped, however, when his editor told him that he was not to find fault with anything but the play or the author, as the principal actors were above criticism. "Most young critics start life," said the editor kindly, "by slating the first show they have to do. Unfortunately for your epigrams the first people you are called upon to criticise happen to be public favourites, so I naturally dread your disagreeing with our readers, who won't have seen the show." "But mustn't I think for myself?" said Osmund, rather taken aback. "What next?" replied the editor. "The business of a critic is to think for the public." Osmund took it out by slating the second show.

He did not always get tickets for the stalls. The high-class theatres, whose seats were at a premium, generally sent stalls, but the second-rate houses, where the audience was usually thin, except at the top, mostly sent him dress-circles. Perhaps it was policy of this sort that kept them second-rate. Whenever he got dress-circles, he revenged himself by not dressing.

One fatal day early in January the *Frivolity* Theatre sent him two dress-circles. As he tore open the envelope, a gleam of triumph shot across his features. "Aha!" he cried, "they are beginning to read me. They are beginning to find out that I am not a mere phonograph like Slateroller. They see that I have ideas—and that I come by them honestly." The dramatic department of the *Whirlpool* was agitated that day; even the editor was drawn into the vortex.

When the first flush of exhilaration had died away, it was borne in on Osmund's mind that somebody would be able to go with him. Again his heart leaped with pleasure. He was not only conscientious, he was sympathetic. He remembered, though it was not easy to recall it, how *he* had longed for orders for the play in the far-off unhappy days; how pleased he would have been had some good fairy unexpectedly presented him with a dress-circle. His whole being glowed with generous anticipation. Some mortal, treading somewhere the thorny path of duty, dreaming in no wise of things celestial, would have that path illumined by a ray of purple light—the heavens would open and drop a dress-circle at his feet. Nay, more; the favoured mortal would sit at his own side, and from that coign of vantage learn who everybody that was anybody was, perhaps even pay for the split sodas of the critics. It only remained to settle who the favoured mortal should be.

Osmund, let me insist again, had a conscience and reviewed ethical treatises with it. It is not surprising, therefore, if he felt that his first duty was to his relatives. Parents he had none. His mother had perished in the accident of his birth, and as his father had died a month before, Osmund had commenced life as an orphan. Now for the first time in his life Osmund missed his parents. He thought how glad his poor consumptive mother would have been to go to the dress-circle and have her narrow horizon illumined by the Sacred Lamp; how it would have delighted the heart of his dear white-haired old father to see the play for nothing. Poor simple folks, few pleasures, indeed, had fallen to their lot! As he thought of these things, his eyes filled with tears. To picture them lying in the cold, cold ground, when they might have been sitting comfortably in the dress-circle of the *Frivolity*—oh the pity of it! Would that they were alive again, or at least one of them! But, alas! wishes would not recall them to earth. Mastering his emotion, the poor young critic thought of his maiden aunt. Lavinia Lobbleby had brought him up by hand—in such fashion that he had taken to his heels at the first opportunity. Still he owed her some gratitude; she had been a raven to him without any suspicion of his being an Elijah in embryo, She lived in Sydenham, and it would take a day to discover her mind on the subject. But the performance was not due for three days yet, so there was plenty of time. He would write to her at once. "At once" did not come on till the evening, for the *Whirlpool* received a solicitor's letter threatening a libel action because its dramatic critic had said that a certain actor did not know two words of his part; so Osmund had to discuss the subject with his editor. The latter, as is the way of editors, was for apologising and explaining that the critic meant two words literally, the actor having said, "God bless you," when the text said, "Good-bye, God bless you." But Little Bethel's blood was up, and he said unless the editor of the *Whirlpool* upheld the dignity of his critic, the drama would go to the dogs. He could prove that the actor was an intimate friend of the author's and considered himself privileged; and he would also put the prompter in the box. Thereupon the editor reflected that the actor was impecunious and unlikely to find a solicitor to take up the case on spec; so he put the letter in a basket where he was in the habit of placing waste-paper. And in the evening Osmund wrote the letter to his aunt.



A day passed without a reply. Osmund was noticeably restless and uneasy. His head drooped a little, and his Malacca cane was swung a trifle less jauntily. He came into the Club, and talked with feverish gaiety. I understood afterwards how his mind must have been racked by the thought that he might not hear from his aunt, or hear too late to allow somebody else to make use of the ticket. Early hardship had taught him economy, and he could not bear to waste a crumb; much less so fruitful a potentiality of pleasure as a ticket for the dress-circle. All that night he lay tossing sleeplessly on his bed, waiting for the morning post. The long expected rat-tat sent his heart into his mouth, and the unwonted morsel almost took away his appetite for breakfast. The letter ran as follows:—

"MY DEAR OSMUND,—I write you these few lines—hoping you are quite well, as, thank God, it leaves me at present—to say that I am astonished at your insulting one who always tried to do her duty by you, and to forget your ungrateful behaviour; but I am afraid when young men run off to London they are lost to virtue, and I have heard say they think nothing of seeing Ballet girls Tight on the stage, and am ashamed, and hope you will send me a ticket for the Crystal Palace, which is near me, and where plays may be seen in the open air without going into a theatre, which I have never done, and, please God, never will. Goodbye.—From your affectionate Aunt, LAVINIA."

Osmund was annoyed. But he reflected that there was yet a day in which to give the ticket away, and, after all, he would have had to see his aunt back to Sydenham, and to refrain from seeing men between the acts. While he was eating the breakfast, his brain was whirling with all the remaining possibilities. Who was the best person to have that ticket?

His relatives all disposed of, he fell back on his antecedents. Several persons had done him good turns in the past, but he could not get at them in time. He didn't know the addresses of some; others, he knew, would not be found at their addresses in time. There were his acquaintances of to-day, and his brother Bachelors; but there seemed to be no reason to hand it over to one rather than to another. His was an eminently philosophic mind, given to weighing pro.s and con.s, and the balance was so equal as nearly to send him off his own. M'Gullicuddy's claim was ethically the highest, but he would feel more pleased if Oliver Green went with the ticket. On the other hand, it would do him more good to stand well with Eliot Dickray. Smith was, perhaps, the most advisable man on the whole, but then Smith's mother-in-law had just died, and he might not care to be tempted to exhibit his joy in public. Rogers lived handy to the theatre, and Osmund could go and have supper with him afterwards; but then Rogers' wife would be jealous at not having been asked too. He knew several of the other sex, but he could not ask any of the girls to accompany him, for Mrs. Grundy would incontinently publish his engagement to her; the married ladies would hardly venture to incur the suspicions of their consorts; and the widows were either too fresh or too stale. With an aching brain Little Bethel pushed his breakfast aside, and reeled to the office.

You may call him a donkey. So he was; but of the philosophic species, which starves between two bundles of hay. About seven in the evening he came into the

Club, breathless, with a wild light in his eyes, hysterically brandishing a pink ticket. He had spent his day in wiring to or hunting up his acquaintances. Nobody could go with him. But one short hour remained before the curtain of the *Frivolity* rose.

I took pity on him, and went with him. I hate the theatre, with its draughts and stuffy smells. I have been behind the scenes, and know what a fraud everything is. There is no gilt for me on the green-room ginger-bread. I know actors and actresses are only men and women—spoilt. But I went—for this occasion only. It was necessary to save Osmund's reason. I felt that, and I sacrificed myself. I shall never forget the wild cry of gratitude with which he fell upon my bosom. His tears moistened my shirt-front, but he assured me it didn't matter. He hadn't dressed, himself. We were going to the dress-circle.

Next day the threatened writ came to the *Whirlpool* office. The actor, for a wonder, had meant what he said. The case duly came up for trial. Osmund stood up in the witness-box for the rights of free criticism; he bore his cross-examination with truly Christian patience. The jury misunderstood the case, and returned a verdict for the defendants, with costs. The court cheered, the judge threatened to clear it, and the circulation of the *Whirlpool* went up ten quires.

After this the *Whirlpool's* critic got two stalls regularly from all except the very paltriest theatres, and Osmund aged rapidly. His brow learnt many a wrinkle one so young should not know. His tawny hair, too, began to be threaded with silver. Every extra ticket meant to him hours of distraction, correspondence, and suspense. Too economical to waste it, too conscientious to give it away casually, too honourable to sell it—he went through agonies of doubt each time. Three agonies of doubt per week soon tell on a man.

What need to prolong the agony? The end was near. One wild bitter day, towards the end of January, when the floodgates of heaven were opened, and a cold rain plashed mournfully on the passive pavements of the sombre metropolis, I met him walking along. His head was bowed, and *the Malacca cane was not in his hand!* If I live to be a hundred, I shall never forget that strange and melancholy sight. I invited confidences in the manner aforesaid. "I am going to get married," he said abruptly. "Come under my umbrella." I obeyed, for though I always carry a bulging umbrella myself, I cannot bear the trouble of opening it only to fold it up again. "It 's no use, my dear fellow," he went on hurriedly, anticipating my remonstrances, "my mind is made up—if it is not to break down I must get married."

"Why?" I gasped.

"Have you noticed what happens when the average young man gets engaged to the average young woman?"

"He buys her a ring," I said feebly.

"*Nonsense,*" he said sternly. "*He takes her to the play.* Many a man I know has not got engaged, simply because he cannot afford to do this. Young men only marry now-a-days, if they can afford to take the girl to the play, or if she will go to the pit. This she is usually too respectable to do—after she is engaged." The words came out coherently enough, but there was that in his eyes I did not like. Poor Little Bethel! The rain plashed heavily on the umbrella, dribbling more gently on our hats, for it was not a new one, having probably been pawned by Noah after the Deluge. Otherwise the silence was tense and painful. "Don't you follow?" he asked fiercely. "Don't you see that many a struggling man would give his right hand if he were only in my position; that half the pretty girls in the world would take that right hand to occupy a stall at all the famous first nights?"

"But surely you will not marry because other men would?"

"No, of course not," with a strange guttural laugh. "But don't you see that if I bind myself to a girl, she will insist on accompanying me and so spare me this perpetual distraction about the second ticket, which makes my once happy life no longer worth the living?"

"But your Bachelorship—your vows——"

"Broken—but not on principle. I don't wish to marry the girl: only to be engaged to her, so that she may accompany me. I would willingly remain engaged to her for ever, but the narrow vision of society," he said gloomily, "sees only one issue to engagement—and that is marriage. I will take her regularly to the play. She shall bless or damn at my side. And when she insists upon it, I shall marry her."

He spoke quietly but sadly. The tears came into my own eyes despite a cynicism I had thought waterproof. Poor Little Bethel! It was useless to reason with him in the state he was in.

"Tell me at least who she is?"

"I do not know. To-day I commence my search. The woman who loves the play most, to whom the theatre is a passion and the drama a perpetual delight—the woman who will never weary in play-going, nor ever refuse to take my orders—she shall be the critic's bride." I turned away to hide my emotion. There was another moment of silence, broken only by the plash-plash of the rain. Then a soft syllable quivered on the air.

"Paul."

"Yes, old fellow." I turned towards him, but could not see him. My eyes were blinded with tears and rain. "Promise me one last thing."

"I promise," I breathed huskily.

"Promise me," his voice faltered again, "that you will break it to M'Gullicuddy."

For answer I pressed his hand. My heart was too full to speak. Was this to be the end of all that bright young career; those roseate promises? He pressed my hand in return and unclasped it slowly. Suddenly he uttered a loud cry as of one in mortal agony, then I heard the rattle of a hansom—and he was gone.

So Little Bethel married, and the Bachelors' Club mourned him for ten days, and pilloried him for all time upon the sable fresco.

* * * * *

The *Whirlpool's* leap upwards was but a spasm. It did not remain a waterspout long. The innumerable penny insurance rag-bags choked its current into slimy stagnation. The acting-managers send it only one ticket now.

CHAPTER II.

THE FEUDAL ANGEL.

Caleb Twinkletop nearly took my breath away one foggy February morning about four o'clock by inviting me to dine with him later in the day. I saw that the invitation had slipped out inadvertently, and that he immediately began to bite his lips for the careless way in which they had kept guard; and as I was very anxious to solve the mystery of his private life, I hastened to decline, upon which he naturally became so pressing that when I ultimately consented he had no chance of backing out. Yes, there was a mystery in Caleb Twinkletop's life; nay, two. The second mystery was how there came to be a first. For Caleb was a simple, guileless old fellow, innocent as an unborn lamb; who found his sole recreation in playing chess and the harmonium. He divided his time between the Bachelors' Club, the City Chess Club, and the prayer-meetings of the Little Bedlamite Brotherhood; for his income was large enough for all these luxuries. He was understood, too, to be a man of family—which is of course very different from a family man. Like most ardent devotees of chess he was a very bad player; and the Bachelors used to rally him on being so frequently mated. We never tired of the obvious joke; nor did Caleb. Both sides were certain of the fixity of Caleb's habits, to say nothing of his opinions; and a joke that lacks the sting of truth is a compliment. Caleb was the sort of man who would not marry even if he were a marrying man. He moved in a daily rut which it was impossible to conceive him diverging from. He was the tram-car type of man. Whatever change his soul might be planning, his body would always carry him along the ancient grooves. Had he been married, he would have gone on being married day after day, year after year—all in the same automatic way. But he was not married—we had the word of two passing respectable married householders for that—and so there was not a single man in the world, or a Bachelor in the Club, of whom we felt more sure than of Caleb, or Cœlebs, as we called him in our fun. It may be said that, passive as he was, he was the sort of bachelor who would fall an easy prey to the first woman who determined to marry him—even to his own servant, if she should set her cap at him. But the Bachelors knew better. Caleb's mind was too busy with chess problems and gambits to be responsive to solicitations or hints from without, or to be aware of any attention less marked than a proposal. Even in the extreme contingency, his fidelity to the Club might always be counted upon. And yet there were premature furrows upon Caleb's brow, in strange contrast with the candid ingenuous pellicle natural to the forehead of an old bachelor. Even his eyes were those of a married man. Nothing could quite extinguish the cherubic twinkle; but at times there was a far-off expression in them, as if posterity were already troubling him with its teething. It was probably only the chess-nuts he could not crack, for he was the soul of honour, and if he had stumbled into matrimony, would have been the first to see the impossibility of continuing to drink with us. And yet I felt vaguely that there was a mystery, and made no effort to repress my natural sympathy with him. But all I could learn either from himself, or from the numerous persons to whom I manifested my sympathy for him, was that he lived by himself in a flat with an old and faithful housekeeper, who had been left to him as an heirloom. Though abroad he spent his money as freely as any one chose to eat or drink at his expense, he would never join in the meal. He seemed to be always reserving himself for sybaritic luxuries at home. No one had ever been invited to cross the threshold of his lift; therefore, when Caleb met with the accident of inviting me to dine with him, you may imagine how eagerly I jumped at the chance—though, like a man of the world, I jumped backwards.

But Caleb had the good sense to hide his chagrin, and was all cordiality when I arrived. He did not even bring up the problem of how to force black to mate himself in a hundred and twenty-nine moves—the animated discussion of which had led to my invitation—till after dinner.

He opened the door himself when I knocked, so that my expectations of seeing the faithful attendant were not gratified. I began to fear Twinkletop would withhold her of malice prepense. The mystery commenced to thicken. I was on pins and needles to know what manner of woman she was, and imparted the desired information as to my state of health as indifferently as if I were speaking of some one else's. My eye wandered sympathetically about the room, trying to gather hints of her. Everything was luxurious, not to say artistic. There were several handsomely-framed oil-paintings, and a number of humorous pen-and-ink drawings, in ebony frames, representing society dinner-scenes, restaurants, and the crushes at supper buffets in the gilded salons of Belgravia. There were also some pretty water-colours, mainly devoted to the portrayal of picnic parties and filling the room with a suggestion of youth and summer. A lithograph over the mantelpiece was only the well-known ecclesiastical "Gourmand." Struck by the strictly proper tone of these pictures, I examined the canvases, the largest of which represented "The Love Feast of the Bedlamite Brothers." A copy of Paul Veronese's "Wedding Party" also had a prominent position, while the smallest of all was a Teniers-like domestic interior, comprising a peasant playing the spinet while his wife lays the table for supper which is seething in the pot on a hearth of the kind on which crickets chirp. Depositing my hat on the revolving book-case, which stood by the harmonium, I glanced at the backs of the neatly-arranged books, catching sight of Oliver Wendell Holmes's prose works; Soyer's *Recipes*; Staunton's *Chess Praxis*; Sims's *How the Poor Live*; *Dyspepsia and How to Cure it*; and *Harmony for the Household.* I do not subscribe to the current maxim that you can tell a man's character by the books on his shelves, though you may possibly tell it by those he returns. I like to draw my conclusion from his premises as a whole. What I saw rather terrified me. I perceived that Caleb was in the hands of a Guardian Angel with a duster. When a man is in the hands of a Guardian Angel there is always a danger that he will realise some day what a trouble he is to the Angel; and should the Angel be clad in petticoats, his pity may pass over into love. I felt this, and I shivered with ominous foreboding. With beating heart, and sympathy grown more acute than ever, I awaited the arrival of Caleb Twinkletop's Angel, stifling as best I could the dread that she would be kept in the background. She came at last, and dinner with her. I was glad to see them. I could barely suppress my joy as my eyes met hers. She was a creature of delight when first she gleamed upon my sight. I could have sat and looked at her for hours, content to let the world go by and the soup grow cold. She was literally the ugliest woman I had ever seen. Never before had I realised the potentialities of ugliness to which old women may attain if they live long enough. Not Meg Merrilies herself, nor the witches in Macbeth, could touch her for hideousness. Hers was not only a perfect ugliness of *ensemble*, every feature was perfectly ugly.

"Don't you like the soup?" queried my host, a shade anxiously, as I sat in complacent reverie, dreaming of the frightful old crone who had left the room to fetch the second course.

"Oh yes, it's very nice," I said mechanically, lifting the first spoonful to my lips. I hope that unintentional lie will be forgiven me on the Judgment Day.

I tried to disguise the flavour with pepper and salt, but in vain. Caleb seemed to be looking at me out of the corners of his eyes.

"She's a good old soul," he said, rather irrelevantly. "She is like a mother to me, and watches over me like a dog."

I did not point out the animal implications of the two metaphors taken together, but silently passed the pepper.

"She is quite a romantic character, you know," he went on, mechanically accepting the pepper-box; "old family retainer, does the whole work of the flat single-handed, madly jealous of anybody else interfering, a sort of feudal relic of the time when my people lived in a moated grange in Lincolnshire, just like Sir Walter Scott, don't you know?"

I permitted the dubious statement as to the novelist's residence to pass, and stuck to the sherry (which was magnificent) till the subject of our discourse whisked away the soup-plates and transformed them into meat-plates. She did not appear to allow her master fish. Perhaps it was Lent, and she a devout Catholic. Many faithful servants do not expect their masters to go to heaven. The kidneys were passable, but unfortunately there was no other guest to pass them to.

"She is attached to me with the last drop of her blood," he went on. Personally I should have preferred a more solid method of attachment, and at the worst the first drop of blood to the last. But I was silent. To throw all the onus of the conversation upon him was the surest way of making him indiscreet. But he did nothing but recommend his '75 Lafitte (indeed a divine dream) till the joint arrived and the female retainer departed again.

"The beef is a little overdone, I am afraid," he said solicitously.

I observed that retainers in their zeal *would* overdo things sometimes.

"Yes," he assented, with an undertone of sadness in his chirrupy accents. "But I am glad you like the potatoes. For my part I prefer them cooked in their skins. All the classical works recommend that method, so I sometimes venture to get one in the streets when my appetite can bear the strain. Unfortunately, baked potatoes are not evergreens—they only flourish in the winter. Cookery is a subject on which Tabitha disagrees with me. And her cookery sides with her." He smiled at this way of putting it—a smile pathetic as it was sweet. It needed not this deeply-felt confession to apprise me of the relations of the gentle old chess-and-harmonium player to his cook. Every look she gave him was charged with solicitude, every movement she made in his service was eloquent with devotion, every word was tremulous with the tender tyranny of love.

But the marvellous vintages which danced and bubbled in my glass through this strange uncanny dinner softened everything for me; and by the time I was smoking Caleb's aromatic cigar in Caleb's voluptuous arm-chair, I had come to the Panglossian conclusion that all was for the best in the best of all possible flats. The dangers I had imagined for my good friend Caleb Twinkletop were imaginary. True, I was hungry and the coffee was impossible, but what were these things in comparison with the knowledge that Twinkletop's Feudal Angel was a hideous crone and a horrible cook?

Good wine may need no bush, but it needs something more to make a good dinner. I would not dine with Twinkletop again.

* * * * *

A fortnight afterwards I was lounging with a dead cigar in my mouth in the smoking-room of the Bachelors' Club, lazily meditating on the principles of our faith that decorated the walls, when I received a telegram. I tore it open feverishly. My heart beat loudly. As my eye darted over the pink paper, I gave a loud cry of agony which woke up the waiters who were sleeping on the premises as usual. I had not seen Twinkletop for a week and my worst fears were confirmed. The telegram ran as follows :—"Come at once in Heaven's name. I am marrying. Twinkletop." To dash downstairs three at a time and into a lamp-post was the work of a moment. Recovering myself, I hailed a hansom and crawled towards my unhappy friend. I found him lying in his arm-chair, smoking and smiling genially. It was the gaiety born of desperation and drink. By his side stood an open champagne-bottle. Still I was disappointed to find him so tranquil and fearless at the approach of marriage.

"Thank you for coming, old friend," he said cheerfully. "When I wired you I was in a nervous mood, due to reaction and fear of what M'Gullicuddy would say. Tabitha had just consented to become my wife after a week's obstinate siege. For seven days I have been imploring her to take pity on me and become Tabitha Twinkletop. It has been an anxious time for her, dear old creature. She has, of course, no blood and was afraid that by marrying me she would tarnish the scutcheon of the Twinkletops. Her love for The Family outweighed her love for Me. But despair lent me eloquence and at length she returned a blushing positive. Then the reaction came. I remembered the Club and wired for you to break it to them, for you are the only man who has ever known my unhappy secret." His voice faltered with emotion. I did not speak. My breath had not yet had time to come back.

He resumed more cheerfully. "But now I have dared and done. The nightmare is rolled off my life. A year more and it would have been too late. My digestion would have been a memory. Now the years of old age lie before me peaceful and painless." His eyes lit up in ecstatic vision.

"You have proposed to your housekeeper?" I gasped.

"To my flat-keeper," he corrected me; "to my cook; to my feudal devotee." Still the same beautiful look of happiness upon his gentle brow. Good old Caleb!

"Oh Paul," he went on, "if you only knew what my life has been up till now, ever since the unhappy day when the faithful Tabitha was left to me as an heirloom under my aunt's will. Her jealous devotion to me, her pride in me and in The Family, and in our descent from the Lairds or what's-a-names of Lincolnshire—all this, great Scott! I could have borne. But her cooking!" He put his hand on the fifth button of his waistcoat in tragic silence. The blinds of the room were down as if in anticipation of the marriage, but the bright fire threw flickering shadows on the wainscoted ceiling. One of them fell upon Caleb's face. To me, sitting with unstrung nerves in that weird room, it seemed, despite his bright visions, an omen of his future.

"How can I tell you what I have suffered?" he resumed, when he was calmer. "She would not let me dine out—it would have been an imputation on her cookery; and who knew what unhealthy things they might give me? I could not eat two dinners—my appetite, though fastidious, is poor. For six months I tried getting my meals surreptitiously from a restaurant, and burnt hers or buried them under the floor. Need I say I nearly got arrested for murder?"

"But why didn't you get rid of her?"

"Paul, I am surprised at you. You talk idly. Can a man get rid of even his old pipe or his slippers?"

I saw I *had* talked idly. The idea of Caleb's having strength of mind and initiative enough to break with a servant! Why, the dear old fellow would have been polite to the old man of the sea, and asked him if he felt quite comfortable on his back.

"I soon wearied," he continued, "of subterfuge and trickery against the woman whose ideal I was. I tried to live up to her faith in me." His voice broke and he dashed away a tear. "I gave up trying to deceive her and sought consolation in my wine, and my cigars, and my pictures of banquets, and my treatises on cookery, to say nothing of the delights of chess, the Bachelors' Club, and the even higher fellowship with the Little

Bedlamite Brothers. I bought *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, thinking it concerned itself with the pleasures of the matutinal meal. It will come in handy for reading now that my Barmecide banquets of the intellect are to be replaced by the real. But why recall the dead unhappy past? It is buried at length, more surely than my ancient dinners. Tell the Bachelors I am really mated at last."

Again that beautiful smile of ineffable peace overspread Caleb's worn features. His brow began to unfurrow itself, and all the smoothness of cherubic childhood settled again upon his wan features. He rose and opened the harmonium and played some strange celestial chord. "But this is fool's mate," I cried. "You are mad; you are putting yourself beyond the possibility of ever shaking her off now."

The seraphic smile lit up the eyes again. The marrying musician touched the keys softly, and the haunting notes rose and fell like a prayer.

"You don't understand," he said. "When she is my wife, she will allow me to get another cook. The dignity of a Bride of the Heir of the House of Twinkletop will not allow her to do her own cooking." He ceased, and his head fell back in mute ecstasy, and through the silence of the dim room I heard the soaring rhapsodies of the Wedding March rise Heavenwards.

* * * * *

So Caleb Twinkletop married his Feudal Angel, and the Bachelors' Club mourned him sore, and M'Gullicuddy maltreated his memory upon the mural monument.

* * * * *

I dine with the Twinkletops often now.

CHAPTER III.

HAMLET UP TO DATE.

ELIOT DICKRAY took the blow of Caleb Twinkletop's marriage most to heart—with the possible exception of Caleb Twinkletop's cook! He did not re-appear at the Club till the Ides of March, and then his face seemed to have grown some years older. He was always a strange, irresolute being, and his glance round the smoking-room was wild and wandering. His eyes flitted from text to text, he shook his head, he stepped towards the inner sanctum, he retreated, he read the texts again.

Eliot Dickray was not Eliot Dickray, but his son. *The* Eliot Dickray was the famous novelist, essayist, dramatist, and universal provider. Our Eliot Dickray was the least celebrated of his father's works; and his popularity was limited to a select circle of friends and Bachelors. His father's position had of course secured him a certain measure of prestige; but at best he was merely a *succès d'estime.* He was of no use in the world except as a support to the theory that genius is one of the diseases which are not inherited. The colossal mental energy of the father had beggared the family estate; it is unfortunate for the inheritors of fulfilled renown that there is no power of intellectual entail. The paternal geniality was, however, his in plenty; and in spite of his occasional fits of taciturnity and depression, his cronies accepted him on account of his amiability, and the champagne suppers in his chambers overlooking the Green Park. His generosity was princely; he had nothing to do with his money or his time but spend them, and he did so right royally. But he paid for his pleasures in ennui. He drifted aimlessly along the stream of existence, giving heavy toll at all the locks, and taking little heed of fog-horns. He was too diffident to steer for anywhere. A low self-estimate may do credit to a man's judgment, but it will not carry him far. Modesty is but a poor virtue, though its ravages are not extensive. I used to shudder to think what would have become of Eliot Dickray had he been born sucking the wooden spoon instead of the silver. He would have swallowed it and choked himself.

O'Roherty came up to him as he fumbled about with his eyes and legs and asked him if aught ailed him.

"No; quite well, quite well," he replied nervously. He shuffled away from his interlocutor. "I can't stop," he said. "Good-bye."

"Why, you 're going away before you 've come!" said O'Roherty, uplifting his eyebrows.

"I have seen all I wanted to. You must really excuse me."

"You have seen only me. And apparently you *don't* want to."

"Oh yes, I do—I mean I don't. I only came to look at these texts again."

The arch of O'Roherty's eyebrows widened. 'I thought every self-respecting Bachelor knew them by heart!"

"Yes, yes; of course they are engraved upon the book and volume of my brain; but still——"

"Well, and now you have read them, you are thinking that—"

Eliot's eyes gleamed with troubled light,—"That," he said hesitatingly, "there are more things in heaven and earth, O'Roherty, than are dreamed of in our philosophy."

"What do you mean by *our* philosophy?"

"The philosophy of us Bachelors, of course."

O'Roherty snorted. Eliot's eyes strayed once more towards the texts. "Do you know," he said, half in reverie, "what strikes me on looking at these texts again with fresh eyes—I—I mean after an interval?"

"Do you take me for a thought-reader?" growled O'Roherty.

"Well, it seems to me," went on Eliot, in the same abstracted way, "that there is a note of regret about some of them, a smack of sour grapes."

"Eh, mon! what 's that?" cried M'Gullicuddy, appearing suddenly from the inner apartment. "Wha 's talkin' aboot sour grapes?" The President's eyes glared suspiciously from beneath his horn spectacles.

"Dickray says we are dwelling under sour grape vines," said O'Roherty angrily.

"No, no, hardly that," said Eliot. "What I say is that these texts have not the true grit, the hearty honest ring of hatred and contempt. That one, for instance, says that '*Love is the only excuse for marriage; and it is not an excuse that will wash or wear well.*' Now the first part of that proposition is a distinct admission to the enemy. It grants that there *is* one excuse for marriage."

"Nay, but dinna fash yersel', mon. The second part sweeps it brawly away agen," said M'Gullicuddy, speaking his native Scotch, and taking snuff in his agitation.

"By no means," persisted Eliot.

"By a' means," said M'Gullicuddy, growing pale at Dickray's blasphemy. "It 's an awbsolute annihilation of the love-argument."

"It is very like a wail," said Eliot quietly.

"Verra like a wail?" repeated the President, dropping his snuff-box in horror.

"Certainly. It laments that the excuse is not durable. It says, What an excellent thing a love-marriage would be! Only, unfortunately, wedded love has no staying-power."

"Tell that to Mandeville Brown!" said M'Gullicuddy menacingly, as he mopped his brow with his coloured handkerchief.

"My dear Dickray," added O'Roherty witheringly, "if you have made a fool of yourself by falling in love, say so like a sensible man. But don't go and abuse the plaintiff's attorney."

Eliot smiled with quiet melancholy. "No," he said simply, "I am not in love—nor likely to be."

"Then why," said M'Gullicuddy, dropping into English, "do you call into question all that we hold unquestionable? I am glad no weaker brother has overheard you; it might have unsettled his faith."

"It is for your sakes I call it into question; your texts tacitly assume that love is the only motive that might induce a Bachelor to marry, and they concentrate themselves upon showing that love, if it be not altogether an invention, is at best as fleeting as the snow-fall upon the river. But love is far from being the only danger to be guarded against; it is money, position, convenience, comfort, conscience, social pressure, a thousand and one things that induce men to marry. By comparison, love is *une quantité négligeable.* Not one of your texts admonishes Bachelors against these; you muster your apophthegms and dash your serried maxims against a shadowy foe; the real enemy lurks in a million guerilla forms along the route. Remember how Twinkletop fell and Little Bethel. These texts are but the lamentations of a disillusioned but romantic spirit; the jeremiad of a lover who sees the worm at the core of Eve's apple. They are, I say again, very like a wail." He turned away more resolutely and strode to the door, then he took a last glance at the Club, dashed his hand across his eyes, and was gone.

M'Gullicuddy and O'Roherty looked at each other aghast. What was the matter? What could have happened? What had produced this mental aberration? Dickray had never spoken so well—nor so lengthily.

The two men were seriously alarmed. M'Gullicuddy's dignity kept him taciturn and tragic, but O'Roherty came over to my rooms the next morning and put the case to me. I was chagrined at having missed witnessing the symptoms for myself. *Cherchez la femme* was my conclusion. O'Roherty agreed with me in fearing the worst.

Woman had robbed us of two of our members; was another to be amputated by the same dexterous manipulator? If she could be found in time we might forbid the banns or hinder them. But how to get at her? Ay, there was the rub. O'Roherty mentioned a detective agency; I am afraid he has no delicacy of feeling. It took me some time to convince him of the meanness of having a fellow-member spied upon, as if he were a criminal or a coming co-respondent. I said that so long as I had a footing in the Club, no Bachelor should be dogged by an outsider. O'Roherty wriggled his mutton-chops, but my veto was absolute. I said that rather than use such dirty spy-glasses, I would try and ferret out what I could for myself.

I called upon Dickray in the course of the next day, but his valet reigned in solitary majesty in the luxurious apartments. He condescended to inform me that something was worrying his master, who had turned his bedroom into a promenade instead of a sleeping chamber. This was all I could extract from the valet, though I made speech silver for him. I concluded that the yield of information was exhausted, and abandoned the shaft.

In the evening I went to the Club; nothing had been heard of him. M'Gullicuddy and O'Roherty listened to my want of news with unconcealed anxiety. A sense of coming misfortune hung over us all. If only I could find the woman! I went out into the streets and wandered aimlessly about, as if expecting to meet her by a miracle. I looked at every passer-by as if he or she might be Eliot Dickray or his evil genius. When the passer-by was two in one, my stare became almost insulting. Near midnight I found myself at the end of Northumberland Avenue. The March wind blew cold and keen from the river, but I did not turn back. Was it Fate that led my steps, or Chance?

Suddenly I became aware of commotion and bustle at the entrance of a building facing me, and in another instant remembered it was the National Liberal Club. What was going on? I crossed over. The hall was filled with an excited conversational throng. A momentary curiosity was succeeded by a flash of recollection. They were waiting for the verdict of Sloppleton.

The member for Sloppleton had died. The tragedy of his death was sore. Years of ambitious lying were crowned by but one anonymous line in the evening posters,—"Death of an M.P." Sloppleton was a sleepy place, the inhabitants of which were amiable and stupid, concerned only about their souls and the local industries. They would not even go to the poll, except when driven by a natty coachman to the sound of brass bands. Naturally, therefore, the eyes of England were turned on the by-election at Sloppleton; there was fixed the axle of Fortune's wheel; for a week and a half it was the hub of the universe, the centre of political power. Justice, Religion, Political Economy, Foreign Policy were among the things that were being weighed in the balance—at Sloppleton. Was the flowing tide with the Liberals, or were they drifting back with the ebb? Was the great heart of the nation still throbbing for the Tory, or was it aching for the Radical? Such were the questions over which heads were broken at Sloppleton—where strong things were said and drunk on both sides impartially. It was an anxious half hour in Fleet Street, where the leader-writers were waiting, manuscript in hand, to know whether the victory they had won was a numerical victory, or merely a moral victory. It was a no less anxious crisis in the hall of the National Liberal Club, where the movements of the tape were watched with far from bated breath. Why do people waste so much loquacity in speculating on news that will be stale in half an hour's time?

I pushed my way into the Hall. I was never a member of any London Club except the Bachelors'. I like to do one thing at a time. But I find it convenient to turn into one sometimes, especially when I have been there with a member and the waiters know my face. So long as you do not take a mean advantage of the culinary resources of the establishment, nobody is a penny the worse. The National Liberal Club was at this time one of my favourite lounging-places. It is such a huge caravanserai, that I have always regarded myself as an honorary life-member, a kind of understudy for the Ex-Uncrowned King who has never shown his face in the place. It frets me to see an honorary life-membership wasted.

It was Eliot Dickray who had first introduced me to this happy hunting-ground; perhaps I might find him here now. I elbowed my way through the crowd into the smoking-room, which was thickly studded with argumentative groups and heavy with the cloud-wreaths from a hundred cigars. I sauntered along, casting glances to the right and the left and peering into all the cushioned niches. My quarry was nowhere to be seen but I was on the right scent, for I met a man who told me he had seen him in this very room half an hour ago. While we were talking a change came over the scene; a roar was heard outside; men pressed towards the entrance; the news flew from lip to lip and lit up face after face like a flying electric spark; the Liberals had scored an unexpected victory; the roof rang with cheers; the smoke swayed before the waving hats and handkerchiefs; some one shouted the majority;

it was large; the excitement redoubled; everybody was shaking hands with somebody else; the crowd tossed about, huzzahing like a parcel of schoolboys; somebody —who *was* a somebody—jumped on a chair; there was a fresh round of cheers; fresh contingents of Liberals poured in from the hall and upstairs; then a deep silence fell upon the members, as they hung upon the great man's exultant rhetoric. I gave one last sweeping glance round the smoking-room, then turned and walked up the noble staircase—in search of Eliot Dickray. I met a dozen or so belated members, accompanied by the waiters, hurrying down from the various rooms towards the oratory; otherwise the upper storeys of the Club were deserted. The library was my last chance; but even that had been left alone in its glory. I walked up to the extreme end of it to see if perchance my man might lurk in a corner. In vain. It was obvious I had missed him in the unusual crowd or that he had left the Club. Keenly annoyed, I threw myself dejectedly into an arm-chair.

As I sat there brooding, a murmur of voices seemed to be wafted to my ear. I started up; no one was near. What could it be? A keen gust of wind smote me in the face and answered me. The balcony! I had forgotten the balcony. I moved stealthily towards the glass door of communication. It had been left slightly open; hence the draught of words and chill air. Scarcely breathing in my excitement I peeped cautiously outside. The night was sombre; the lights of the river gleamed redly; the moon shone fitfully through brackish cloud; the leafless branches in the gardens and on the embankment rustled mournfully. In the furthest corner of the balcony, before a small round table, with their faces towards the railway bridge, sat two men—one slim, the other burly. Both wore overcoats and crush hats. One back I did not know; the other was Eliot Dickray's.

"Very well, Eliot, you are obstinate, I am firm. There can be no advantage in continuing the conversation, except to our doctors, for the air bites shrewdly. It is very cold and my cigar has gone out. This is the second time you have wasted my time with your insane demands. Let us go in."

I heard a match strike as he re-lit his cigar. I bit my lips; I had come at the end of the conversation. But the next words rekindled my hopes and heated my interest to boiling point.

"Father, will you not understand?"

So this was Eliot Dickray, *the* Eliot Dickray. I ventured a long glance at the great literary lion. I had never seen him before; he did not keep his son's company. He was a star, far-off, inaccessible. To-night he had fallen as near earth as the Club-balcony. I longed to see the face of the man whose books I had so often borrowed, but his skull was not transparent. It was not the back he wore in my ideal portrait. What that visionary back was I did not know. I only felt it was not the back before me. Still, the face might be more in harmony with my preconceptions. Noiselessly I wheeled a capacious arm-chair towards the window, and obscured myself in its luxurious depths. With ears pricked up, I listened to the dialogue as from a stall, though I and the persons of the drama were back to back.

"My boy, I understand perfectly—that you are a fool."

"Do you also quite understand what I have resolved to do?"

"Certainly—to demonstrate the fact to the world."

"Father, since our first conversation I have thought over this thing day and night. You have eluded me. Yes, sir, you may smile, but you have eluded me. You were never in when I called."

"My dear Eliot, my engagements!"

"Are not to balk my engagement!"

"To whom?"

"You know whom, father."

"You never told me you had gone so far as to engage yourself to——"

"Yes, father, I am in honour bound. I made the poor old man a definite promise of redress. What other course was open to me as an honest man when I learnt the truth? The sin must be expiated; cost what it may, justice must be done."

"My dear Eliot, when you know as much of the world as I do, you will prefer the heavens to fall."

"Oh yes, I know now how the times are out of joint."

"You are not the man to set them right."

"But you are, father."

"Not even I. I tell you again you are making a mountain out of a molehill. Such molehills are the natural pimples on the unhealthy face of the world of to-day."

"Yes, sir, I know. You are quoting——"

"My own book. Quite right."

"Well, sir, I refuse to accept the sentiment. I had hoped it was not—yours. I still believe in honour—and what it asks of us. Come, father, I will not believe that you will set your face against the only righteous way out of this unrighteous situation. It is hard—it is a great sacrifice; but it must be made."

"For the last time, Eliot, if you have taken leave of your senses, allow me to retain mine." There was the noise of a chair moving violently. The elder man had sprung to his feet in a huff.

"Then you refuse?"

"Absolutely. It will disgrace you no less than myself."

"Then I must act without your consent."

"You threaten?"

"Nothing. No, father, you know I have not the strength for that."

"And yet——"

"And yet, unless you change, our lives must drift apart never to meet again. I cannot touch a penny of your money, sir, henceforwards."

"What! You will throw up your allowance!"

"Yes, sir; you have always been very good to me; but now, since you and I are of so vitally different a mind on the most important crisis in my life, it is impossible for me to be dependent any longer upon you."

"Oh, but this is stark, staring lunacy! Why, Eliot, think a moment. Where does the expiation come in if you have no money?"

"I have my youth. I am only thirty-two."

"But what will you live upon? Upon your youth? I have heard that others have lived upon your youth, but you can't do it yourself."

"I will live upon money earned—honestly."

"Earned how? You have not been trained for anything"

"And therefore am ready for everything."

"My dear boy, you are an absolutely incompetent young man. It seems cruel to say so but it is kindest to remind you of it. You have never succeeded in anything you have undertaken; your will is weak, your execution random, your laziness incorrigible. You are a shiftless, thriftless being, with a bent for metaphysics and champagne. Faults or virtues in a man with an income become vices in a man without one; and as, moreover, you propose to add honesty to all your other vices, it needs no prophet to foresee you swirling among the flotsam and jetsam of humanity within a twelvemonth. No, my boy, you are not well; you have been going to bed too early in the morning. Pack up your portmanteau and go off to the Riviera for a month, and pitch your fads and your scruples into the Mediterranean."

"What you say of me, sir, is unfortunately too true. I have been but a well-dressed tramp, a vagabond in broadcloth. But I am not too old to turn over a new leaf."

"And what do you propose to write on this new leaf?"

"A story."

"A story?"

"Yes, sir, a story!"

"*You* write? Ha! ha! ha! Well, well, so the leaf you turn over will be taken out of *my* book."

"No, sir. I hope to write my own books. And yet, in a sense, it *will* be a leaf out of your book."

"In what sense?"

"Does it not strike you, sir—you who have seen so much of novel-writing—what an excellent germ for a story we have here?"

"Damn it, sir! Do you mean to say you are going to publish this story—that you are going to foul your own nest and wash your dirty linen in public?"

"No, sir. I shall publish the story anonymously. Nobody will ever suspect it has anything to do with me or you. Besides, it would not do to invite comparisons between my work and—the other Eliot Dickray's. I should be damned instanter by all your enemies, whose malice is impotent to damage your own popularity. I am not so prolific at plots as my—my namesake. Why should I trouble to invent when I have a subject made to my hand? My first tottering steps will be best taken if I lean on the go-cart of reality. I shall start my new life and my story to-morrow."

So long a silence ensued that I thought it would never end; all I could hear was their heavy breathing, as if they were glaring defiance at each other. Then there came a roar of laughter from the great novelist's lips.

"'Pon my word you are right. It is indeed a plot—for a farce! You will make your début in fiction by telling the truth! Ha! ha! ha! Excellent. And I'll tell you what: you annoy me dreadfully, Eliot Dickray; but I'm hanged if I won't give you an introduction to my old chum, the editor of *The Banbury Magazine*, and ask him for my sake to publish your first essay in—truth. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Father—for the last time I use that word—you will not understand me after all. This is no subject for levity. It is the deepest tragedy of my life. I am much older than I was a month ago. I am old enough to earn my own living now. If your decision is final, so is mine. My life must henceforwards be lived apart from yours—not helped by it to the extent of a farthing, or even of a letter of introduction to any one. Fortunately—alas! that I should have to say it—my mother is dead. The tie between us is not a complicated knot, it concerns you and me only. It can be severed at a stroke. When I have written my story, it is not to your friends that I shall go——"

"Then go to the devil!" roared the great novelist, as he burst open the casement door, bumped against my arm-chair, and strode off with another oath. I had barely time to catch a glimpse of a handsome sensuous full-bearded face writhing with vexation.

Would his son follow him? I waited, not daring to stir a finger. Presently I heard the young man pacing the terrace with restless, unsteady feet. I shifted noiselessly in my seat and peered over the back of the arm-chair. The moon was hidden now by the rack of clouds, and the sough of the wind among the plane-trees by the river was the only sound that mingled with those tragic footsteps. Eliot Dickray paused at last, and leaned his elbows on the parapet, and gazed long and intently towards the sombre water that coiled like a black, red-spotted snake below him. Then I saw his shoulders heave convulsively. He was sobbing like a child.

Oh the tragedy of it! "The deepest tragedy of my life!" What a dark tale of sin and shame was here; deepened by the cynical worldliness of the father—so false to the fine teaching of his works,—relieved only by the resoluteness of the guilty to make atonement. O Eliot, Eliot! thou whose eccentricities astonished even the Bachelors, how couldst thou have fallen into so conventional a gin? True, thou hast redeemed thyself somewhat as an original by casting off thy father, because he will not have thee marry the woman of thy choice; but yet, methinks, it were better to have loved and lost.

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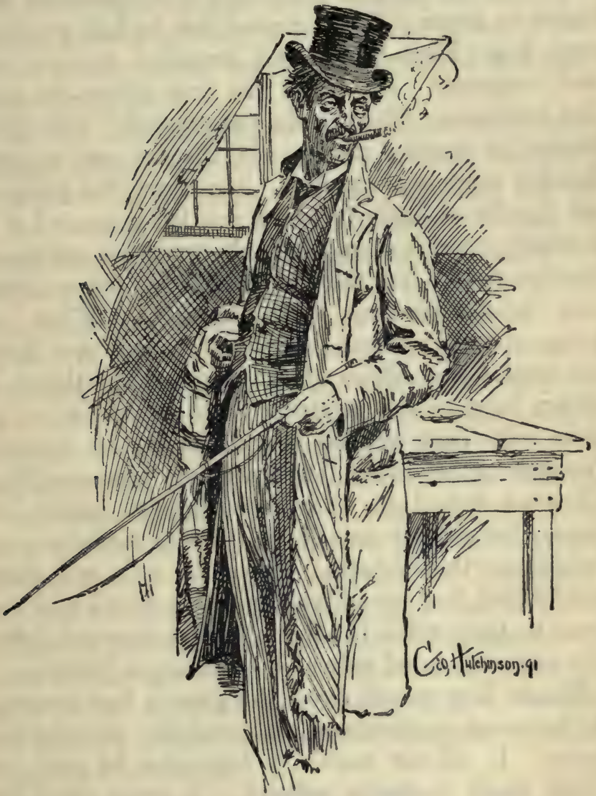
Though the broad outlines of the story were clear to me, I waited with pitying eagerness for the details. Long before my sympathy was appeased, Eliot had written the letter of resignation which I expected daily. Its arrival put the seal upon my hypothesis—if a thing so certain could be called a hypothesis. Our grief for the departed was unusually severe, and, for my own part, I do not know how I should have borne up, if I had not been sustained by the duty of reading, or rather skimming, the fiction of the month. To anticipate a little, I may say at once that during the next few months I sat several hours a day, with wet towels round my head, reading everything that might possibly be the story of Eliot Dickray's secret sin and marriage. My mind became a chaos of incongruous impossibilities; my brain a blood-sodden pulp; my skull a seething caldron of inane sentimentalities. But I read on. Till you try to keep pace with it, you have no idea what an appalling amount of unnecessary lying is turned out every month. And they are not even new lies, they are such an old pack. After I had hunted the needle, sick and dizzy, for a fortnight, it occurred to me that I was neglecting the American hay. At first I read everything; in widening my sphere to take in Transatlantic lying, I found myself driven to select, and to discard stories whose titles were out of all relation to the plot of which I was in search. That was why, when the story did come along, I tossed it aside; and it was only by the merest accident that I came to read the following story, under the queer label of

HAMLET UP TO DATE.

One o'clock and a foggy night. No watchman proclaimed the tidings, for it was modern London over which the fog lay, and the contemporary night-patrol speaks only from the soles of his boots. But the bell of St. Paul's tolled the hour, and the fog needed no telling. "Hell is a city very much like London," as Shelley hath it; but never more so than in February, when the weird street-lamps serve but to render the darkness visible. To-night the fog wrapped the metropolis in its yellow folds so thickly that unfortunate pedestrians despaired of home and even of England and beauty; the very cabmen had, as a rule, preferred their beds to crawling with smarting eyes through the Egyptian darkness. Up till midnight torch-bearers were to be had, but now even these men of light and leading were inaccessible, counting their gains in the doss-houses.

Harold Ross groped his way along, looking for a hansom. He had retired early from a gay supper-party in one of the Inns of Court, taken a few steps eastwards in search of a remembered cab-rank, then lost his bearings, and was now approaching Fleet Street by way of a slow succession of buildings and objects quite unfamiliar to him. He knew the world's great cerebral nerve as well as most Londoners; but he knew it by perches and roods. In a fog you have to feel your way by inches. You see your own street as under a microscope and are astonished at the unknown world that opens upon you at every step. But to Harold Ross the revelation of Fleet Street in all its minutiæ of brick wall, iron railing, and quaint portal and alley, was not sufficiently interesting to compensate for the choking in his throat, and the exacerbation of his eyeballs.



He made up his mind to fight his way back to the supper-party and abandon the hope of reaching his comfortable bed in the neighbourhood of Regent's Park. Naturally, at this point he caught sight of a hansom's beacon-fire looming ahead, and making for it, found that it was one of a series smouldering sullenly through the murky atmosphere, but flashing to him the message of hope as the news of the return of Agamemnon was flashed to Argos. He concluded that he had wandered away from Fleet Street and stumbled upon a cab-rank unawares. He hailed the first driver—in more than one sense. The vehicle was engaged. Still light-hearted, he accosted the second. He, too, was engaged. Harold's heart began to sink. Something was going on, and this file of futile hansoms was but a symbol of it. A steady progress down the rank convinced our weary traveller that to him these hansoms were but a mirage, their beacon-fires but wills-o'-the-wisp. What was going on, he discovered, was writing. Half-way down, the resplendent offices of the *Daily Wire* threw an electric light on the mystery. The myrmidons of the press were busy settling the affairs of the universe. The gods of the modern Olympos were launching their columned lightnings, and measuring out praise and blame; the smudgy sons of Vulcan were manufacturing their cheap thunderbolts. When the gods and giants had fulfilled their dread functions, they would be driven home to their villas in Camberwell by constant Jehus, who made the usual reduction on taking a quantity.

Harold Ross passed down the ghostly line tempting the buttoned-up phantoms, and receiving good-natured banter. It did not matter to him what he paid, nor which smart journalist suffered. In great crises like these the best of men are selfish; and Harold Ross was far from being the best of men. He was the thriftless son of a famous man of letters—a poor rich creature, fond of chicken and champagne and careless chat; a lover of literature and art—but a mere dilettante; a being without a backbone, a dreamer of dreams, lounging lazily through life, the prey of random impulses and flickering ambitions, never putting his hand to the plough without drawing it back; in brief, one of those men whose lives are literally the "dream of a shadow" of the Greek poet.

The last hansom had been left deserted by its driver. Harold waited patiently for his return, refusing to extinguish his last hope and half forgetting the lapse of the minutes in one of his customary reveries. His thoughts were sad and compassionate. He asked himself why these poor men should have been tarrying there in the wretched fog and cold, whilst he, who had never in his life done a stroke of work for his fellows, had been sipping Chablis and swallowing oysters in a warm and happy atmosphere of good fellowship? For the thousandth time he wallowed in the luxury of pity and high unselfish thought; conscious all the while he would never move a finger to help anything or anybody in the world. His reflections were ended by a tall, shabby figure lurching up against him. The odour of the fog was momentarily ousted by a waft of whisky. "Pardon, guvnor," was jerked in thick, hoarse tones from the figure, already grown phantasmal half a yard off. "Didn't know you were there. Whoa! stand still, my beauty." There was a sound of equine impatience mingled with patting.

"Are you the driver of this cab?"

"Yessir, not at your service."

"Oh, come now. Don't say that. I'll give you what you like to take me to Regent's Park."

"Wouldn't advise the (*hic*) canal to-night, sir; but not surprised you 're thinking of suicide. Night like this would recon(*hic*)cile a murderer to the gallows."

"It 'll be the death of me in any case if I don't get home," said Harold, rather struck by the man's perfect English, marred only by the little Latin expletives in the brackets. "Come, what will you take?"

"I should say whisky neat, sir, if it were a more Christian-like hour, but as the publics are all closed, thank you for nothing (*hic*). Unless you 'll take me into a club." And the gaunt driver leered with a ghastly grin through the gloom.

"Come, come," said Harold impatiently, "I 'll give you a sovereign to drive me to Regent's Park."

"Sir, I am engaged. My hirer lies yonder." He flicked his whip in the direction of the *Daily Wire* offices. "Whoa, Bucephalus!"

"Two sovereigns."

"Sir, I am a cab(*hic*)man of honour (*hic*). Still I cannot afford more than a sovereign's worth of such a luxury. Jump in."

Harold obeyed with alacrity.

The driver addressed him through the trap-door. "You won't back out of it afterwards for a couple of bob? What 's fare isn't fair in this weather," he added chuckling.

"It isn't. The four-mile radius is sponged out of existence. Drive on, my good fellow, and my man shall give you some grog at the end of the journey." He let down the window, boxing himself up from the fog, and relapsed into reverie as the cab crawled cautiously onwards. How long he mused he knew not; but when the cab stopped suddenly with a shock and a tremor, he pushed open the flaps and jumped out mechanically, thinking they had arrived. Before he had time to look around, the gaunt driver was at his elbow with a lighted lantern in his hand.

"Poor brute 's injured himself, I fear," he said, more soberly than he had yet spoken. "Not my fault. Walked into a pillar-box. Bruised his scapula. Gee up, my Pegasus. Bear up, Bucephalus." He caught hold of the bridle and tried to lead the animal along. It made a few steps, then paused, breathing heavily.

Harold groaned. "What 's to be done?"

"I am afraid, sir," said the cabman philosophically, after forcing the horse another few paces, "that this is one of the situations in which the only thing to do is to ask what is to be done."

"How far are we?"

"About half-way. Fortunately, if I am not mistaken, we are only within five minutes of the stable. I will lead Bucephalus there, and forfeit one sovereign and the grog."

"And what if I refuse to pay?" said Harold, choking with annoyance and fog.

"Then, sir, I shall commence to swear. I have the filthiest and most extensive vocabulary in London."

The unexpected threat so tickled Harold that he burst out laughing.

"But what is to become of me?" he said, gasping from defect of breath and excess of fog.

"I live near the stables, sir, and if my humble hospitality can be of any service to you, it is freely at your disposal. I can work off the second sovereign that way."

"You are, indeed, a rare bird," laughed Harold, the Bohemian adventurous instinct taking strong hold of him. "I will accept your hospitality as freely as it is offered—that is, at a charge of a sovereign."

"It is a bargain," said the gaunt cabman. He strode forwards gallantly, holding the bridle of Bucephalus with one hand and his lantern in the other. The horse laboured along no less gallantly, and Harold trudged at the side of the twain silently, but in no morose humour, scenting a new experience as keenly as the war-horse the battle.

In ten minutes' time he was following his host up the creaking rickety stairs of a slum attic. Streaks of light descended upon them through the chinks of a cracked, blistering door.

"Why, who's wasting my paraffin?" said the cabman. "Surely Jenny is gone to bed!" In another moment he threw open the door, disclosing a large but dingy garret with white-washed sloping ceiling, dimly lighted by an oil-lamp standing in the centre of a bare deal table. A pale woman rose as the door opened, with a piece of calico in her hand.

"Back so soon, father!"

"Up so late, Jenny!"

"Yes, father. I expected you home by half-past three, and as I had a lot of sewing to finish I thought I might as well sit up and do it, and it's such a fearful night that I thought you'd like some hot coffee when you——"

She paused, catching sight of the stranger.

"Jenny, my love, this is Mr. Fare, a gentleman who cannot find his way home in the fog, so I have offered him the shelter of our lowly roof. Mr. Fare, this is my daughter Jenny. Be careful, sir, or you will bang your head against the lowly roof in question. *Sublimi feriam* *sidera vertice. In medio tutissimus ibis,* come into the middle of the room and your crown will be safe."

Harold Ross bowed to the cabman's daughter and the garret's roof. He walked towards the bright fire, and, having warmed his hands and sloughed his overcoat, he cast a curious glance at the strange couple who stood exchanging whispers. For the first time he saw how hollow-eyed, thin-cheeked, and puny-chested a man his guide and companion was. The lips were full and red, the nose was aquiline and carmine. The brow was high and broad, crowned by masses of tangled grey hair. Dissipation was stamped on his features; the big D of drink was branded like a curse upon his forehead. His skeleton was so thinly padded with flesh that it reminded Harold of a scenario. The daughter's look was no less cadaverous, but the refinement of her face, the unflinching earnestness of her sad eyes, spoke rather of poverty and pain than of culpable physical bankruptcy. She might have been any age between thirty and thirty-five. She was slim and tall like her father, but her print dress was as clean and neat as his coat was greasy and crinkled. She put down her sewing, and, turning towards Harold, said with exquisite courtesy, "You will let me give you some coffee, Mr. Fare."

The cabman seemed to chuckle with his eyes as his daughter addressed the visitor by name.

"Oh, thanks!" said Harold, "I am freezing."

The coffee was served in huge clumpy cups, and the specific aroma which the *bon vivant* visitor loved was absent; still it was hot and not unpleasant to swallow. Jenny spread a coarse table-cloth for the edification of the guest and cut some thin bread and butter, of which Harold did not partake.

"And now, Jenny, you must go to bed," said the cabman. "To the deuce with your sewing. I am rich to-night. Long live King Fog!"

"O father, give it me," pleaded the woman impulsively, and her eyes told the story not of cupidity nor rapacity but of anxious dread. Then she blushed with infinite delicacy at the betrayal of the family skeleton. "I want you to make me a birthday present," she said, laughing nervously.

"My dear, the £ of the £. s. d. is in somebody else's pocket just now. There are two of them. But I have no fear as to the transfer. Good-night, Jenny."

She bent down and kissed him as he sat at the table, then with a "good-night, Mr. Fare; sorry the accommodation is so bad," she flitted noiselessly through a door in the wall and Harold heard the key grating in the lock.

"My daughter," said the cabman proudly, "has always had her own bedroom. It is the one luxury she has been able to retain."

"From which remark," said Harold with interest, "I gather that you have seen——"

"Better nights—precisely. *Noctes Ambrosianæ*, sir." He got up and went to a cupboard and had a tussle with the handle, which refused to open the door. "Jenny must have locked it," he said at length, "and the glasses are there. I had intended offering you some whisky." He drew a flask from an inner breast-pocket.

"Not for me, thank you," said Harold. "Another cup of coffee will do for me. Thank you, I can help myself."

"In that case, sir," said his host, "there can be no objection to my sipping at the fountain-head." And he put the bottle to his lips.

"Can I offer you a cigar?" said Harold, suddenly bethinking himself that he would like to smoke.

"Of course, sir," the cabman said, selecting one from his guest's case, and kindling it over the lamp. "It's not often now I enjoy another man's cigar by more than the scent of it. But do not let me keep you up; there is your bed. You will find it clean, if hard. Trust Jenny for that."

He pointed to the furthermost corner of the gloomy room. For the first time Harold noticed a sort of curtained alcove.

"My good fellow, you are very kind, but I can't take your bed. I can very well smoke by the fire."

"Just what I was thinking of doing, sir. A cigar like this to my whisky is not to be bartered for a bed of down—much less a shake-down. Confound the lamp," he added, as he noticed the dwindling flame, "the wick wants trimming." He carefully drew off the lamp-glass and operated on the cotton with the scissors which lay on his daughter's calico, apparently careless of the fact that her work would smell of the lamp. "What a nuisance to have no gas!" he said, adding, with a splendid American accent, "Yas, I have struck ile, but it's tarnation little recommendation in the Old Country, I guess." He laughed bitterly. "Jenny ought to be run after by the British peerage."

The lamp burnt steadily for a moment, then the flame began to sink. "Curse it all, it's the oil that's run out," said the cabman. "I'll keep the fire up." He threw some coals on it and choked what flame there was. "But I haven't got any more paraffin, and I don't suppose you'll like to sit up in the dark. Come, sir, you needn't be afraid of being robbed and murdered here, though nobody in the world knows of your presence here to-night and the opportunity is excellent. Not that I should have the slightest scruples in killing you, but there's Jenny to square. Jenny, sir, has old-fashioned notions, and what is worse, she has absolutely no sense of humour. Jenny takes life seriously—I, in a mere spirit of frolicsome irresponsibility; in that spirit I should take yours."

The lamp flickered weirdly; the fire smouldered dully; the room grew dimmer and dimmer; the spasmodic dying lamp-flame threw the strange gaunt form of the host in ghastlier outlines on the frowsy ceiling and the white-washed walls. The end of his cigar was a circlet of fire in the gloom. Harold shivered; decidedly, it would be pleasanter to go to bed like a Christian. He had not the least fear of robbery or assassination; the vein of queerness in his own composition gave him the instinct to understand the strange being at his side; he knew he had to do with a harmless Bohemian exiled for his sins from his native land. To sit upon a hard wooden chair in the dark garret might be romantic, but it were nicer to lose consciousness beneath a counterpane. He went to the window, lifted up a corner of the striped glaze blind, to see if haply the fog had lifted. There was nothing to be seen but an ocean of opaque mist. With a gesture of resignation, he betook himself to the alcove, drawing aside the curtain which slid on a ring overhead. An iron pallet was revealed, over one corner of which were two triangular book-shelves fixed in the angle of the wall.

Not without curiosity Harold's eye rested upon the books. They seemed familiar. The title of one of them caught his gaze, but ere he could be sure he had read it aright, the light failed and the room was plunged in a dusky fog.

"You are looking at my books," came in strange sardonic tones from the darkness.

"Yes," said Harold, "I thought——" The jet of flame leapt up defiantly and shone steadily for a moment in the face of death. Harold uttered a cry. "How strange!" he said, "why, you have all my father's books!"

The flame sank, spurted, sank—and rose no more. There was a moment of intense silence.

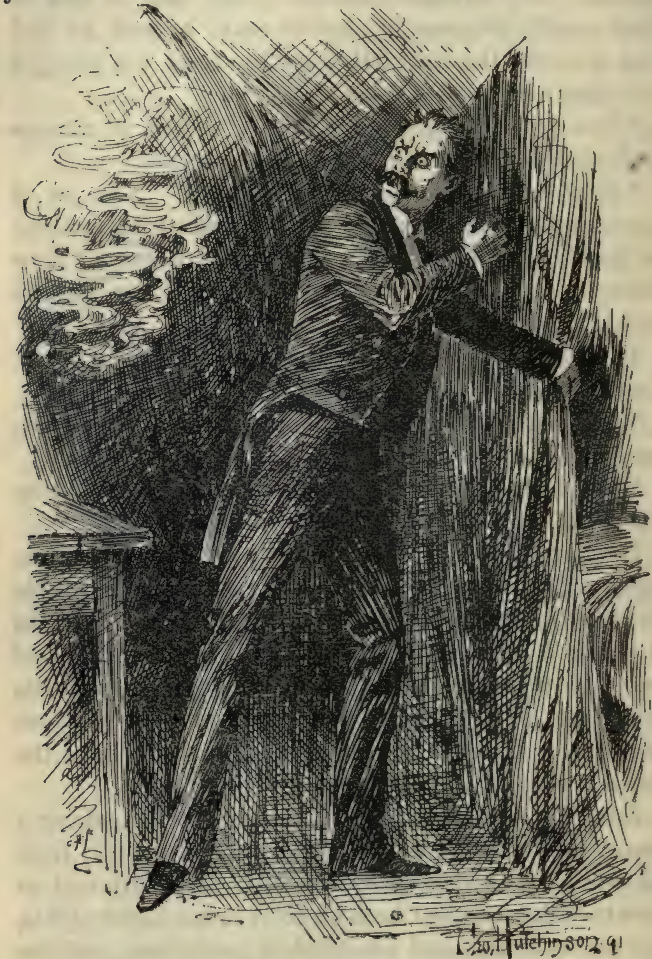
"Are you Harold Ross?" came in strange tones from the depths behind him.

"Yes, I am the novelist's son. And now you know who I am, pray tell me in return, who are you?"

He turned and looked towards where the thin, haggard figure had stood, but there was nothing visible through the gloom except very, very faint white wreaths of smoke curling fantastically round a terrible eye of fire. A strange eerie sensation came over him. His blood ran chill. From the centre of the vaporous impalpable Thing there came in sepulchral tones the words, "Harold, I am thy father's ghost."

Harold's pulse stood still, preparatory to making a spasmodic spurt. Then he turned away nervously from the white film and laughed uneasily. He surmised at once that the man had been an actor in his better nights, and had thus acquired his fund of quotations, and his command of language good and bad.

"Come," said Harold, "that's not a fair return for my confidences. I told you who I am; tell me who you are."



Again the voice came from the centre of the curling rings, "I am your father's ghost."

Harold laughed resignedly. "Well, keep your secrets. Fortunately my father is alive, but if he were dead I hardly think he would be reduced to driving a hansom in the next world."

"He drives a handsome bargain in this," sneered the smoke-rings.

"If you mean he only allows the publishers a commission——"

"And he drove a publisher's hack hard," continued the smoke.

Harold's blood recovered its warmth. "What do you know about my father?"

"As much as a ghost usually knows about the author of its being, that is all."

"What do you mean?" said Harold, his breath coming fast and his chest contracting.

"I am your father's ghost, and wrote all his books."

"The devil!"

"Precisely; that, like the jackal, is another name for it."

Harold rushed at the sardonic smoke-rings on chastisement bent, but barked his thighs against the table, and the room rang with hollow laughter.

"My dear Harold, facts are facts. From the noise of the collision between yourself and my hospitable board, I gather that they are also news. I should have thought there would have been no secrets between you and your illustrious father."

"Good God, man! are you mad?" said Harold huskily.

"The critics think me a genius," said the mocking Mephistopheles.

"I know little or nothing of my father's private relations," said Harold vehemently. "But I know that you are a liar."

"That is what I am telling you. My lies have filled your father's volumes and his pockets. All his eulogists say that I am one of the greatest liars of the age."

"Pah! you are drunk," said Harold contemptuously.

"Not now," retorted the cabman. "But if I had not been a disciple of Bacchus neither your father nor myself would have been found on the rank we now occupy."

"Good God! this cannot be true! *My* father!"

"Do you think," said the smoke indignantly, "that I would tell a lie for nothing? Me, an old pressman, who began life as a penny-a-liar!"

The room was not warm, but Harold's agony exuded from his forehead in beads of perspiration. His voice was hoarse with a terrible fear that the liar was telling the truth. The conceptions of a lifetime were tottering.

"What proof have you of this?" he demanded fiercely.

"Proof? A thousand proofs!" said the smoke-fiend sardonically. "The proofs of all your father's novels. He destroyed the manuscripts (Ross's MSS. will never be sold at Sotheby's) but in his confident carelessness he took no steps to prevent me retaining the proofs. The corrections are all in my handwriting. Of course he could not correct his books himself. They were not his own children. To-morrow you shall see them."

"No, I must see them now. I cannot rest with this horrible suspicion on my mind."

"Have you cat's eyes?" queried the ghost.

"No, but poke the fire, man. I shall see by its light."

The devil stirred up the smouldering coal till it stuck out a mocking tongue of flame and revealed the substance of a grinning phantom, which went to the table-drawer and drew out a heap of printed slips. Harold knelt by the broken fender to examine them. His shadow was an amorphous un-human blotch upon the whitewashed wall. It was a horrible moment. He let the proofs fall from his hand and put it to his eyes. The writing was not his father's. When he spoke again, his voice was tremulous and subdued, and charged with respect and pity.

"Forgive me for my offensive language," he said. "If this be true, and you cannot expect me to believe it without further and different proofs, you are a much-wronged man."

"I can give you plenty of proofs of that!" said the ghost.

There was a long pause before Harold spoke again. Then he broke the silence suddenly, and there was a note of hope in his voice.

"My father's new novel was published last week. You could not have written that."

"No, I did not. When I said I had written all his books I was speaking loosely. His last three books were by another 'hand' in your father's factory. Is it not a commonplace of criticism that your father is now in his second manner?"

Harold groaned. It was too true.

"The second manner," pursued the devil implacably, "in the critic's mouth, implies that the author of the earlier manner is dead. New experience, fresh ideals, have gradually modified his first literary personality till it is completely moulted. So, too, your father gave up the ghost of his first period and hired another. The critics say he has struck a rich new vein of character and incident, and a maturer manner, and shaken off the last crudities of adolescent genius for the full ripeness of the autumn grain. The first part is true, but I happen to know that the new ghost is barely out of his teens. They would never recognise my maturity, even if I had been fifty years in bottle." Again the drunkard's hollow laughter reverberated through the room and sent a shudder through the listener's being. Harold could scarce longer battle with the belief that his father was a rogue. His filial instincts bristled defiance; but his susceptibility to new impressions was a powerful ally on the side of conviction.

"Speak on; tell me all the story," he muttered.

"The story of the stories! Yes, I will tell it you. But get up from your knees and sit down. That's right," he said, as Harold obeyed mechanically. "Have a cigar. I can recommend the brand." Harold took out his cigar-case and his father's ghost selected a cigar for him and lit it with a wisp of paper.

"Now we are comfortable," said the ghost. "Life is smoke but smoke is life. Ashes to ashes, but ash to ash. A ghostly tale should begin and end in smoke. Thank you; yes, I will have another cigar myself. And now, sir, to my story, which shall be brief as gratitude."

He drained the whisky flask and commenced:—

"Honest labouring man as I am now, I began life as a pressman. I am fallen, fallen, fallen from the Fourth Estate. I began as a brilliant penny-a-liar, and if ever my editor complained, I pointed out that I supplied him with exclusive information, which appeared in no other paper. By stages far from easy, I mounted from penny-a-lying to dictating the policy of *The Twinkler* to an amanuensis. But the intoxication of power was too much for me, and I fell down the ladder I had climbed so tediously. I was not discouraged, for *la joie de vivre* was always strong in me, and I knew a few pressmen, who got me occasional work when I proffered to do it, so that I made enough for bread and cheese and kisses! They would not trust me with regular work, that had to be turned out with punctuality and despatch, but I earned enough to keep body and soul apart whenever desired. I was recognised in quilldom as one of those brilliant Lucifers but for whose providential fall the respectable Gabriels would find no market, and the mellifluous Michaels be compelled to sheathe their quills in their wings once more. Then I met your father. He was a cross between Lucifer and Gabriel—clever, but commonplace and careful. He wrote very smart articles and lived decorously and gradually gained a wide reputation as a brilliant but reliable journalist. He made one or two contributions to the heavy magazines and became a recognised man of light and leader-writing. This is the journalist's climacteric—his most dangerous period. It was never more dangerous than to-day, when the mass of readers has augmented out of all proportion to the number of men they care to give hearing to. Your father was besieged with invitations from editors and syndicates. He wrote anonymous dramatic criticisms for eleven papers—London, provincial, or foreign; picturesque parliamentary reports for twelve; and occasional leaders and signed articles for about twenty-five. It is so hard to refuse cheques. But it is harder to earn them. The task of writing eleven dramatic criticisms, all different, is not so easy as it looks. When you have said a play is good, bad, and indifferent, you can only go on ringing the changes. The Parliamentary reports are not so bad, for the politics of the paper you are writing for is a guide to the shades of colouring.

"It is when writers attempt too much that they go to the devil. In due course your father came to me. My beginnings were small and my devillings spasmodic, but I soon became indispensable. I wrote most of his London Letters for him. He got three guineas for each, which he honestly shared with me. I did not grumble, for I was spared the trouble of looking for work, and I hate trouble. I liked writing London Letters and putting on the grand air of haunting the Lobby, being hand and glove with all the lions, and having a private peep-hole in the Cabinet Chamber. They were no trouble, and the only species of work I could be trusted to do regularly. I kept sober to do them. I invented a story in one letter, varied it in a second, commented on the discrepancies in a third, and contradicted it in a fourth. The London evening papers often quoted all the four versions, and I wrote numerous leaderettes for your father commenting on them all. This was a happy innocent time in my life. I was more often sober than not, and in short was quite moralised by my devilry."

"Then my father did not even write his own articles!"

"Not all of them. How could he? How can any respectable journalist get through the work he has to do? Why, I know journalists who write descriptions of ball-dresses who don't know a flounce from a furbelow."

"And how do they manage?" inquired Harold sadly.

"They get the blue devils, of course—the learned lady writers, you know. But your father never got entangled in the clothesline—at least not directly."

"All this is a revelation to me," said Harold. "My father never cared for me to mix in his own circle, and he impressed upon me that I ought to feel grateful for being able to live without it, in both senses. But surely he wrote his first novel himself—*Winifred Wynn*—that made such a sensation?"

"Not a line. He has no idea of novel-writing. He is a smart journalist, but he couldn't tell an *artistic* lie to save his life."

"But how came he to turn novelist?"

"Somebody started a magazine and wanted it written by well-known names. He offered your father ten guineas for a thousand-word tale."

"But if my father had never won his spurs in fiction—had never even written the smallest story!"

"Magazine editors are always on the watch to discover new talent—in old names. If a man explores New Guinea, there is a great demand for his views on the Deceased Wife's Sister's Bill; if he makes a hit as a comedian in the House of Commons, editors pester him for lyrics; if he invents a patent safety sausage-machine there is a sure market for his stories of high life; and if he distinguishes himself by succeeding to a peerage, the 'title' pages of the so-called *Nineteenth Century* will be thick with his lucubrations."

"Yes, I have noticed something of the kind," said Harold wearily.

"Well, then," said his father's ghost, "that was how I took to novel-writing. Your father came to me in great trouble—he was going to be married and wanted money—and told me of the offer. He said that he thought my London Letters gave promise of a novelist, and as he generously offered to share fair and share alike, I consented to try. The result justified the editor's sagacity. The little tale created a little sensation, and I wrote *Winifred Wynn.* After the success of that my head was turned and I took to drawing my money in advance, mitigating my claims in consideration. Somehow, I got very little out of the volumes of *belles lettres*—novels, essays, poetry, and the dramas—that succeeded—in two senses. The more he made the less I got. But it would not pay me to quarrel with him, and no publisher would touch my work without his name on it. Besides, I knew that if I had not been a literary ghost, I should have been a literal one long ago. Your father used to lock me up in his room for months together when a new book or play was on the stocks, so I was steady perforce. Even then I was very erratic; and often and often, when your father got letters of remonstrance from the publishers, he used to come into my den and indignantly reproach me with the discredit I was bringing upon his character. But he ought not to have reckoned without his ghost."

"But how did you fall so low?"

"To the driver's perch? Yes, I suppose it is a fall; though Carlyle says all work is equally sacred. I did not drop into that at once. Whether because my invention flagged, or because I was too uncertain, I forget, but after twenty years of faithful service your father started giving me less and less to do. He was feeling for his second manner. He found him, and I was discharged—with a caution to hold my tongue."

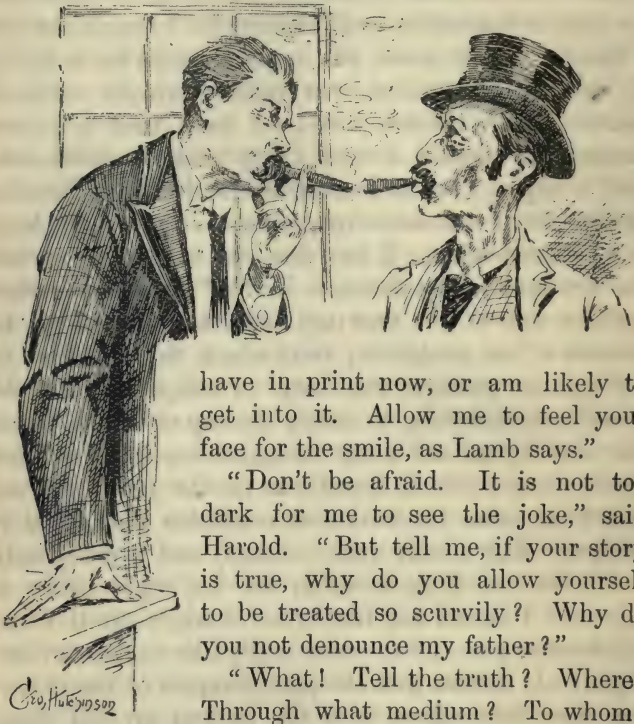
"And nothing else?"

"Yes, a hundred pounds or so. A hundred pounds doesn't go far with me. Rarely further than the first holiday place I get to. This went with me to Brighton. I returned alone. That was four years ago. Since then I have tried all sorts of things for a living. I could not go back to journalism or literature, for *I* hadn't written a line for twenty years, but in my struggle for a living I have drunk in—no, not merely whisky—lots of materials for another novel. I have been a penny steam-boat steward, a bum, a dog-fancier, a mesmerist, and a super. For a year I served in the Salvation Army; but I was saved by getting a situation as M.C. in a dancing saloon; I lost that and supported myself for six months by Jenny's sewing, after which that goddess out of the (sewing) machine induced me to become a 'bus conductor; from which the transition to my present position was easy. I sought out an old friend who had risen to nearly the top of the *D.T.*, and the memory of our early struggles together in Fleet Street induced him to transfer to me the job of driving him home after his work—on condition that I did it cheaper. This I have done—cheaply and expeditiously—for the last three months; for the night traffic is light and I should not like to see Jenny's eye if I lost this regular job. I have been really like a ghost revisiting my old haunts and the pale glimpses of the moon; but what may ensue from my leaving my old chum stranded in the fog to-night, I cannot say. Allow me to re-light my cigar at yours."

Harold was deeply moved as his cigar met the cabman's in the masculine substitute for a kiss. The dual glow was a symbol of mutual sympathy henceforwards.

"But why not publish this novel you have in your head?"

The cabman shook the head containing the novel. "Who would publish it? My daughter Jenny," he said with a despairing chuckle, "is the only thing I have in print now, or am likely to get into it. Allow me to feel your face for the smile, as Lamb says."



"Don't be afraid. It is not too dark for me to see the joke," said Harold. "But tell me, if your story is true, why do you allow yourself to be treated so scurvily? Why do you not denounce my father?"

"What! Tell the truth? Where? Through what medium? To whom? No doubt I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word would harrow up the soul—but the law of libel has to be reckoned with, that lovely invention for the protection of scoundrels and the scourging of honest journalists. Your father could easily put me into a prison or a lunatic asylum. The proofs would be said to be a fabrication; the accusations malicious or maniacal. Might is Right, now as ever. There are a dozen leading organs in which your father could champion himself and ladle out vilification or badinage to me."

"Do you mean to say my father is so base that he would descend to write anonymously about himself?"

"You forget that his ghost would do it. No; I am no hot-headed enthusiast to risk exposing him. I am an old man, sobered by half a century of drink. Do you think I would sacrifice myself on the altar of Truth at my age? When I was younger I might have done it perhaps. But now when I am not the ghost of his former self!"

"Then I will do it," cried Harold, starting up.

"You?"

"Yes; it is monstrous that you should be cheated out of your reputation and your earnings. Oh to think that I am the son of a swindler, who has lived by exploiting the talents of others! And I—it is your money that has kept me in luxury all my life! I dare not look you in the face!"

"By the time the sun dawns you will have got over it, my dear Harold."

"Never," groaned Harold. "You have crippled me for life. But this injustice must be righted. In all the catalogues Harold Ross must be replaced by—by——"

"Edward Halby, at your service. You're a fine fellow, Harold, but you don't know your own father. It's a wise child that does. I am sorry I told you but I really couldn't help it. The situation was so odd. Let us say no more about it. There are only four persons in the world who know."

"Who is the fourth?"

"Jenny. It is her only happiness to read the old reviews on your father's books. When she is very angry with me, she turns to some lofty moral passage out of one of the books themselves, and then comes and combs my hair tenderly. She would have married some honest man long ago and deserted me, if I hadn't thrown in those soul-moving sentences. 'Cast thy bread upon the waters,' you see!"

"Poor girl! What a lot should have been hers! A great man's daughter, respected and admired." The young man bowed his head in grief and abasement.

"Don't take on so. It 's an everyday matter, as I 've already told you. Most of the famous writers of the age are quite unknown. Have you not noticed that some of the most celebrated names are sometimes affixed to contributions contemptibly weak?"

"Oh, of course I have. You mean that they have let ghosts do the work."

"No; their ghosts have been laid up, and they have been compelled to understudy themselves. The fact is, that great baby, the Public, is only a judge of the quality of names, not of the quality of the writing; so that when a man has made a reputation in the literary line, he follows the example of all successful tradesmen nowadays and turns himself (though quietly) into a joint-stock company. Or, if he prefers to retire altogether, he sells his name to a syndicate, which pays him the capitalised value of it, partly in money, partly in shares; calculated according to the number of years his popularity is likely to last. Then he puts his hands, together with this lump sum, into his pockets for the rest of his life, while a score of unknown authors are employed by the directors to turn out books with the special brand on the cover that the Public raves about, and containing gore, or psychology, or humour, or piety, according to the nature of the first success. Sometimes they blunder into hiring a very clever hand in the "works," and the author's reputation is bolstered up for an unexpected term of years, to the great advantage of the dividend. Now you understand why the books of present-day writers are so curiously unequal."

They sat talking till the morning light stole into the garret. The wasted brilliancy of this consumptive-looking creature fascinated him. The cabman's mind was a distorting mirror of paradox, and its reflections were twisted quaintly and not seldom disagreeably; but the flashing phantasmagoria of images held Harold's attention enchained. He even accepted some breakfast when the deft-fingered and early-risen Jenny proffered it. His father's ghost knew so many shady things that were worth being introduced to. He went away burning with admiration and righteous indignation, and the cabman had to go after him to ask for the two sovereigns.

Harold did not go to bed that morning. He searched, Japhet-like, for his father, but the great novelist was a social eel and was always at home at other people's. A little arithmetical calculation would have shown that he must have written his books in his sleep; but nobody had all the data. After some days Harold hunted him down. An eminent actor had returned from America, and was re-opening the *Lymarket*, with *Hamlet.* Knowing of the friendship between his father and the tragedian, Harold purchased a stall. By good fortune it was behind his father's, but the overture had ceased before the lion came in. Harold had just time to greet him as the curtain went up. Then a religious silence settled on the house till the entrance of the Danish Prince set it rocking for four minutes by the clock. During those minutes he made several efforts to say to his father what was raging in his soul; but the great man's nonchalant complacency and air of distinction awed him. The easy affability of the novelist's nod to the celebrities strewn about impressed him. Was it possible this man, whom he had so reverenced, to whom the world looked up, was a mere windbag? He began to hope again. The smoke-clouds of the garret rolled off him like a nightmare at sun-dawn. The audience ceased their applause at last, and the mediæval Danish Prince left off grimacing to the nineteenth century. The play proceeded. The fifth scene arrived.

"*Alas, poor ghost!*" said the great tragedian.

"*Pity me not,*" replied the ghost, "*but lend thy serious hearing to what I shall unfold.*"

"*Speak,*" replied Hamlet, "*I am bound to hear.*"

The art of the player, the intensity he put into the words, held the audience spell-bound. But to Harold every word struck home, bringing back the scene and the agony of the night of the fog.

"*So art thou to revenge when thou shalt hear.*" The dread, sonorous tones smote him like the sound of a trumpet.

"*What?*" said Hamlet.

Harold bent forward and hissed in his father's ear, "I am thy father s ghost, Edward Halby!"

An electric shock seemed to traverse the novelist's body. His head fell back, his face pale as death.

* * * * *

For hours that night his son talked with him, pacing the streets of the West End, both unconscious of the flight of time. Harold's demands for perfect justice were insistent. He conjured his father to throw away the worser part of his heart and to acknowledge his guilt to the world. His father argued, stormed, and jested, but never budged an inch. The novelist contended that his position was thoroughly justifiable; nay, one that redounded to his credit, if the ledger were fairly balanced. He pointed out how the moral effect of these books, which were influencing thousands for good, would be dissipated if they were known to be the work of a drunken Bohemian. The Public abhorred the "devil" and all his works, and stupidly confused the work of art with the artist. He said he could easily have written the works himself, if he had had time, and he had simply acted like the masters in all trades, sub-letting the work according to a contract that was perfectly free on the side of the employee. It was a gross breach of confidence and good faith on the part of the workman to reveal the secrets of the craft, even to his master's son. Edward Halby had always been dealt with generously and had all the inner satisfaction of successful authorship, quite as much as Sir Walter Scott. He simply published his books under the pseudonym of Harold Ross—that was all. What did it matter if, as the schoolboy said, Homer was not written by Homer but by another man of the same name? It was no concern of the world's. Besides, he was not the only person involved. Numerous critics and publishers and even friends would become public laughing-stocks, if he made the indiscreet avowal his son desired. There was that friend and admirer, the French writer, M. Bourtain, who, in the *Revue des*

Deux Mondes, had shown the inevitableness of Harold Ross's writings in the light of his birthplace and his early upbringing, and had cited him as a shining illustration of the theory of heredity and of the application of science to literary criticism? What had the theory of heredity done to him that he should deal it such a blow? If he owed something to Edward Halby's reputation, he also owed something to his French friend's. Who should decide which should suffer? Ethical questions were by no means the simple things his feather-headed and unworldly son imagined! They involved endless conundrums and people; and casuistry had never yet been reduced to principles.

The son replied hotly that people with principles had never yet been reduced to casuistry. But his cause was hopeless. He could not prevail upon his father to disavow even one book, and thus gradually break himself of his reputation. The dawn found the great man still as set against sunset and eclipse.

It was when the young man began to realise the impotency of his wishes, when he felt himself distracted at the burden of duty set upon his weak shoulders, and his reason slipping away down the precipice so suddenly opened at his feet, that a gleam of hope burst upon his brain. It was the idea of vicarious reparation! To expose his father was beyond his strength; could he not expiate the sin? Could he not rise in the scale of being and develop into a scapegoat? What if he took himself seriously, if he banished his self-mistrust and gave keener ear to the promptings of literary instinct! What if he made a reputation and paid it over to Edward Halby! His father was a moral bankrupt; well then, it behoved the son to discharge his hereditary liabilities in full. But Edward Halby was a dying man; the sunshine of fame was not for him. One thing alone remained. Edward Halby had a daughter. If he married her, any reputation he might make would be kept in the family. Edward Halby's blood ran in her veins and the compensation would be as logical as the catastrophes of Greek tragedy. Harold Ross had looked upon himself as a confirmed celibate; but Fate had thrust a life-task upon him and he must not shuffle it off like a coward. Yes, he would marry Jenny Halby, and take his wife's name. He made a last appeal to his father—perhaps he might yet be saved from the cruel necessity of marrying a worn, middle-aged woman, whom he did not care two straws for.

But of this he said nothing to his father; he did not want his father to be swayed by pity for him, but purely by considerations of right and justice. The final scene took place at night upon a terrace overlooking the Thames. It reminded Harold of the battlements of Elsinore. His father told him to go to the devil. He went to his father's. He gave up his tainted allowance. His end was as tragic as Hamlet's. He married Jenny Halby. His reputation is yet to make.

* * * * *

So ended the enthralling story, to which I alone had the key. It was rather amateurish in parts, I thought, and the title was rather forced; and, being a ghost story, it ought to have come out as a summer Christmas number; but still I followed it with breathless interest. Whether any one without my reasons would find it so exciting I could not tell. Of course with this powerful clue I easily discovered the real Edward Halby, whose name was Canning, and the real Jenny. The ghost gave up the flesh six months afterwards and within a week of the funeral Eliot Dickray published a novel under the name of E. D. Canning. It was at once hailed as a work of immense power, and so I, alone in the world, knew that the world was mistaken; that Eliot Dickray senior was a sham, and Eliot Dickray junior the genius. His father had just that measure of talent which so often sires a genius. His father's reputation had always overshadowed the son; it helped, combined with his natural vacillation and diffidence, to keep him a flaneur. But the sudden demands made upon him had drawn out the latent genius and E. D. Canning promises to be one of the glories of contemporary literature. His identity will soon leak out, however, and he will become one of the stock instances of hereditary genius.

I believe the strangely assorted couple, whose union was such a blow to the Bachelors' Club, lived happily ever afterwards, for the woman had a noble and cultured soul.

But quite by accident I discovered one day that she was only the cabman's step-daughter.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BACHELOR ABROAD.

By this time the Club was in a reduced condition, not only as to members but as to finances. We were now only nine and the drain on the assurance money was very great. We felt that if any more of us married we should die.

An extraordinary general meeting was called for the first of April. The extraordinary thing about it was that it answered. The first idea hit upon was Henry Robinson's. It was to graft our Insurance System on to a popular penny paper. We immediately went to the Editor of *Silly Snippets* who lived in the Square and told him that we were willing to become nine annual subscribers and transfer to him our reserve fund in exchange for back numbers, if he would insure us against Matrimony, as he insured his other readers against Death. He pointed out that he did not insure them against death but only against accidental death. He was willing to accept the risks of accidental matrimony. If any one of us was found married with a copy of *Silly Snippets* in his pocket, he would plank down the money. But if it could be shown to be a case of marriage of malice prepense—well, he kindly offered to see us condemned antecedently.

He proceeded to complain that his readers were a most ungrateful lot, who were hardly worth wasting scissors and paste upon. He said that they had a most unpleasant habit of going and getting killed in percentages that flew in the face of all statistics. I said that the frequency of cases of sudden death while reading *Silly Snippets* was quite easy to understand. We then left. We heard afterwards he had looked upon our visit as an attempted All Fools' Day hoax.

The Editor's refusal to take the risks of deliberate matrimony naturally damped our spirits. His fear that we should marry communicated itself to us and we were sad. Henry Robinson was especially doleful at the failure of his idea. He had a good position in a bank and so was supposed to divide the financial genius of the Club with Moses Fitz-Williams. We returned to Leicester Square and sat smoking and thinking deeply. The extraordinary general meeting was resumed. What made matters worse was that no new applicants now stepped forward to fill up the gaps in our ranks as they used to do in the early days of the Club. We did not wonder at this; the developed stringency of our conditions and the uncertainty of receiving the minimum of white balls naturally disheartened any who might have offered themselves for election. Still their subscriptions would have been welcome.

M'Gullicuddy was the first to stop thinking. "Bide a wee, lads," he said, and his dropping into his vernacular showed how deeply the simple old Scotsman was agitated by the peril to his Club. "No sae dowie. We will pay oot na mair siller to a departed Bachelor till he has been married twa years. We tak ower little trouble to varify the records o' oor members' marriages. We see the registrar's certeeficate, verra true. But we ken richt weel that clerks will sign marriage certeeficates recklessly for half-a-croon. Gentlemen," said M'Gullicuddy, blowing his nose impressively with his picturesque pocket handkerchief, "we maun haud a post-nuptial examination and speir for oorsels before we part wi' the bawbees an' toom the exchequer. I shall be the coroner and you the jury. Gentlemen, if we conduct the inquest by legal methods, we maun do it slowly. (Hear, hear.) We couldna do it under twa years. (Cheers.) Twa years is no ower lang to sit upon a renegade." (Loud cheers, during which the honourable old gentleman resumed his seat, flopping down as vigorously as if the renegade were already upon it.)

It was universally felt that M'Gullicuddy had saved the Club, and we competed eagerly for the honour of supplying him with whisky. In his anxiety to avoid invidious distinctions, the good old Scotsman submitted to taking a "wee drappie" from each of us. He drank Irish. He knew how the other sort was made.

Thinking it over in calmer moments since, I have got hopelessly muddled to understand how staving the difficulty off for two years could be of any use. But then Scotsmen always have a talent for finance. In two years anything may happen. To shift the burden off the shoulders of to-day,—is not that the whole principle of modern business and modern politics? To-morrow can take care of itself. It will shift the burden on to the shoulders of the day-after-to-morrow. There was a Chancellor of the Exchequer wasted in M'Gullicuddy.

We had hardly concluded the formal passage of the statesmanlike motion seconded by our venerable President, when we heard a commotion in the Smoking-room, and, opening the door, we saw a red-faced woman (we knew she was a woman because she wore no gloves) quarrelling with the waiters.

"How dare you insult a honest woman as earns her bread by washing and doing for gentlemen, you pair of good-for-nothing shirt-fronts?"

"Hey, my sonsie lass, what ails ye?" said M'Gullicuddy in his broadest Scotch. He generally adopted that after copious Irish.

"Why, I've come with a telegraph for Mr. 'Enery Robinson. It's very important I know, 'cause I've opened it, knowin' it was very important, and so I took the trouble to bring it myself as I had to go this way. But them tailors' dummies was both snorin' around when I came, and when I woke 'em up, they up and asked me if I was a married woman. I says, what's that to them? and then they says, unless I was married I couldn't come in. As if I wasn't married in Bow Church five years come next Whitsuntide, and my certificate is framed in the parlour next to the memorial card for my poor sweet William who flourishes in 'Eaven a twelvemonth come next

Quarter Day, little knowin' the cowardly aspirations that would be cast on one who——"

"Dry up!" said Henry Robinson, blushing violently and pushing his way to the front.

"Yes, dry up your tears, my good woman," said Joseph Fogson, M.D., B.Sc., who had a soft heart and could not bear to see even a fly weep.

Robinson's blushing face turned white as he read that telegram. He put his hand to his heart and the pink paper fluttered slowly downwards. I put out a sympathetic hand to arrest its threatened collision with the floor and in doing so could not help reading the message.

"Come at once Albert Gate. Gold discovered. You must leave England immediately. Rose."

"Thank you, thank you, Paul," said Robinson, clutching the telegram feverishly. "Good-night, boys. Important business. Keep my fire up, Mrs. Twittle, I shall want some hot coffee about eleven." And with that he was off.

We looked at one another blankly. My heart was beating wildly but I said nothing to the Club. Why should I betray the poor young fellow yet? Shocked as I was beyond measure by the awful revelation latent in that simple telegram, all my sympathy was still with the unhappy Robinson. After all he might be innocent. Rose might not be his wife after all, but only an accomplice in the robbery. It is so easy to misjudge our fellow-creatures. Not till I had ascertained beyond all shadow of a doubt that he was guilty would I denounce him to the Club. Then, and then only, would I brand him before the eyes of his fellows as a married man.

I allowed a decent interval of five minutes to elapse. Then I said I had an important appointment to attend.

I flew to the Albert Gate in an omnibus and walked up and down in the cold for an hour, disguised in a beard which I always kept in my pocket in case I should be asked to play in charades at evening parties. Robinson did not come, though every now and then I saw some one that looked like Rose. At first I waited patiently, because I surmised that Robinson had taken a cab and would be on presently. But as the minutes wore on without any signs of him, I began to be very uneasy about him.

Robinson was a stumpy young man, somewhere between thirty-one and thirty-three. The Bank he was in was "Murdoch Brothers," and he was understood to enjoy the confidence of whoever ran the concern. Murdoch Brothers of course were dead, poor fellows; but all men may be Brothers if they can afford the shares. "Murdoch Brothers" had ceased to be men. They were a "house" and Robinson was in it. He had a salary of three hundred a year, which would have sufficed for his wants if he had not contracted the incurable habit of trying to get his plays produced. There is no harm in writing plays, but it is expensive trying to get them produced. It is a habit that grows on one. Now at last I knew by what means he had been enabled to indulge it so long. I do not know why Henry Robinson wrote plays; the only reason I can divine for it is that his name was Robinson and he thought Robinson was as good as Jones. Nobody but myself in the Club knew that Robinson tried to get plays produced, though the way he spent his money in Strand taverns on supers and disengaged tragedians might have opened the eyes of the blindest. Nobody but myself knew even the amount of his salary. I am afraid there is very little mutual sympathy even between Bachelors.

Thus much I had known about Robinson before; but now a new and lurid light was shed upon his existence. The confidence he had enjoyed at his bank he had betrayed. True, it was a small matter; but a scrap of paper shows which way the wind lies. How could I hope that he had been faithful to the higher confidence he had enjoyed at his Club?

With distracted brain and restless umbrella I tramped up and down, blowing my fingers and peering eagerly into the darkness. If Rose was at the rendezvous, she was as disappointed as I, for Henry Robinson was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps the news of the discovery of the gold had been too much for his weak nerves, shattered by a steady course of trying to get his plays produced. Perhaps he had taken flight for the Continent at once, leaving Rose to shift for herself. The clocks struck ten. With a heavy heart I shaved off my beard, put it in my pocket, and returned to my chambers. I lit my pipe and settled myself in my rocking-chair before a roaring fire. But I could not rest. My heart was heavy with foreboding and aching with sympathy. The wind began to wail outside like a lost Bachelor. I got up, walked up and down, threw myself on the rug, sat down again, deposited my legs on the mantelpiece. All in vain. There was a something tugging at my breast, urging me not to sit supine while Robinson was in danger. It was an indefinable feeling, something like a St. Bernard dog, and it tugged me on in dumb piteous insistence—on, on, towards Robinson's lodgings. It was eleven o'clock. Robinson would be having that hot coffee. I knew Mrs. Twittle's coffee. She was not one of those rare souls who have risen to the secret of coffee. Still, bad as it might be, Robinson would be up and drinking that coffee now. Why should I not share it, with his other troubles? Yes, I would no longer hesitate. I dismissed the tug and ran the rest of the way to Robinson's diggings. The wind was almost cutting now. The stars were still hidden. I should have been quite cold if I had not run. At the door I paused. Suppose his instructions to Mrs. Twittle had been only a blind. Suppose, knowing that she had read the telegram, he had given them only to show he did not intend immediate flight. But no; the odds were he was at home, packing up his belongings and swallowing the hot coffee before taking the night mail. If so, my visit might not strike him as opportune. However, it was too late to draw back now, and I was about to perform my peculiar rat-tat on the knocker when it struck me I should be surer of a welcome if he fancied it was the neglected Rose come to reprove him. I therefore simulated the knock of an irate but cautious female, allowing as well as I could for the fact that her Christian name was Rose.

I had not long to wait, though my heart compressed twice as many beats as usual into that short minute. I heard Robinson's shuffling step in the passage. He lived on the ground floor. As he opened the door, there was a careworn, anxious look upon his face, but the moment he caught sight of me an expression of relief took its place and his eyes lit up in welcome.

"Come in, Paul, old man," he said warmly.

My dodge had succeeded. He was under the joyous reaction from an anticipated scene with Rose. Congratulating myself on my knowledge of human nature, I followed him into his sitting-room.

"Sit down by the fire, old fellow," he said, "and have a cup of coffee. It 's nice and hot."

It may have been hot but it wasn't nice, if past brews were to be relied upon. However, I accepted a cup and began to spill it stealthily in the ashes. The room was indeed in a litter. All the signs I had anticipated were present in abundance. A large travelling-case was yawning in the middle of the room, and articles of necessity or virtue lay promiscuously around. A pile of MSS. tottered uneasily in a corner. Robinson himself walked about the room, neither tottering nor uneasily. His unperturbed air, as if there were nothing surprising in being surprised in preparations to fly the country, convinced me that he had mistaken his vocation. It was not that of a playwright nor a defalcating clerk. Henry Robinson was a born actor.

"You are the very fellow I wanted to see," he said, with an admirable assumption of candour. "I was thinking of writing for you to-morrow. I shall be too frightfully busy to call on anybody."

"Oh, indeed," said I, with an equal assumption of ease; "anything up?"

"Rather! Don't you see what a mess I 'm in? The fact is, I want you to break it to M'Gullicuddy and say good-bye for me to the fellows."

Break it to M'Gullicuddy! As he said those fatal words, which I had heard so often, my hand shook so violently that the cup fell from my hand. It did not break as it would have done in one of Robinson's plays, and he picked it up and refilled it to the brim, without noticing the spoilt dramatic effect. As I had spilt at least half of the stuff before this, I could not curse my awkwardness sufficiently, especially as I had to do it all internally.

"Don't be so cut up about it, old fellow," said Robinson, as a tear came or was pumped up into his eye. "It 's the best thing that could happen to me."

"Ah, they all say that!" I could not help observing. "But I thought you liked the Club too well to give it up."

"Of course, I shall miss it awfully. Still, there are compensations. You see I can't afford to throw away this chance." I could not quite get the hang of the thing yet, but it was evidently a case of the most flagrant kind. "Money?" I inquired curtly.

"Eight hundred a year."

I whistled! A braw tocher, as M'Gullicuddy would have said. Verily, a vile world!

"But of course it won't go so very much further than my present income, big as it sounds."

"That is self-evident, especially as the years roll on and you increase and multiply. But what does Rose ——?" As her name slipped out, I bit my careless lips in vexation.

"Rose?" he repeated. I knew he would want to know how I had learnt her Christian name, and it now dawned upon me that in any case I had hardly the right to call her by it. "Rose?" he went on. "He thinks it 's a splendid thing for me and rightly counts on my eternal gratitude."

"He counts on your eternal gratitude!" I gasped.

"Well, after all, Mr. Rose is the bank-manager, and has all the say. He promised me long ago that if there was a new opening for a branch bank, I should go out and establish it, and it seems he's heard the first news of a new goldfield in South America and there's going to be a big rush there and I'm to be on the spot to snap up the *clientèle* first. It'll be no end of fun. That wire I had from him to-night was about it." He handed the damnable scrap of paper to me. I took it and perused it with a show of interest. It cost me all my strength not to crush it between my fingers, as though it were of wax.

"I've just come back from Rose's house," he went on unconscious of the tempest that raged within my breast. "Awfully swell place in Albert Gate, don't you know? No. 32. Wish I had his income, by Jove!"

"Yes, and now you will marry!" I said bitterly. He laughed a frank, almost boyish laugh. "No fear of that, Paul. My plays are my wife and children; if they are not my bread and butter. Down among the diggers I shall get lovely new materials; besides the money to pay for matinées when I return. Re-assure yourself, old man, there's as much chance of my turning traitor to our common principles as of a manager putting a play of mine in the evening bills."

"And you propose to still continue a member of the Bachelors' Club?"

"I do *not* propose—to still continue a member of the Bachelors' Club," he replied, making a note of the *mot* on the summit of the tottering MSS. "Good bit of repartee, that! Yes, dear boy, you don't get rid of Henry Robinson as quickly as you can mention his brother Jack's name. To show you how earnest I am, before I leave England (which I have to do by the end of the week) I intend to pay two years' subscription in advance. It 'll be at least two years before I can revisit the old country. Cheer up, Paul. Why, there 's not a sounder Bachelor in the Club than Henry Robinson, always excepting you, my dear misogynist!"

"Don't be so sure," I could not help saying. I knew how the stoutest of us may fail suddenly, disappearing down one of the trap-doors of that terrible matrimonial bridge in Addison's wonderful allegory of the Vision of Marriage.

He laughed a bright defiant laugh.

"You will be very lonely in the New World," I said, "away from all your old companions and comforts, among rough diggers with bowie-knives and six-shooters that you won't care to mix yourself up with. When night falls on the Sierras you will be glum and miserable. There will be no Bachelors' Club to go to; reason will not feast and soul will not flow. There will be no music-halls and you will not find Nature's stars a sufficient substitute. Your characters would, but you wouldn't yourself. Now frankly, old man, you wouldn't, would you?"

Henry hesitated a moment, for, like all the Bachelors (I do not include myself for obvious reasons), he was keenly conscientious. Then he laughed heartily once more, his stumpy figure shaking with merriment.

"Don't be an ass!" he gasped.

"That 's what I 'm afraid *you'll* be," I said gloomily. "You 'll get dull and depressed and in a low state of health and you 'll go and commit matrimony!"

He laughed again, but this time there was a nervous tremor in his voice as if he had begun to realise the danger I foresaw so vividly. "But it takes two to make a marriage!" he said more seriously. "Where is the other party to come from? Why, there's no creature on earth so rare at the diggings as a woman. That's the only place in this wide world where she's worth her weight in gold. If man is but dust, then woman is gold-dust at the diggings. A petticoat is as rare as a plesiosaurus. As for a baby, it's so scarce that they use it for a Salvation Army and an Art Department, and it moralises and refines a whole camp of the dregs of humanity."

I shook my head obstinately. Though I could not meet his arguments, I was not convinced by them.

"The very rarity of woman will enhance her value in your eyes," I said. "Read the political economy books. If there is an insufficient supply of woman she will become dearer to you."

He began to look troubled.

"And then there is the voyage!" I went on remorselessly. "Look what temptations you will be having on that voyage. There is sure to be a beautiful young girl on board with a history, or an Italian grammar, or something of that sort, which she will draw you into conversation about. She will swing in a hammock on the deck, with a straw hat, a muslin dress, and a bewitching smile, and she will look up artlessly into your face as you bend over her and she will wonder, opening her blue eyes to their widest, how you manage to know everything about currents and compasses and other things you are ashamed to confess your ignorance of. And then at night, especially if it is rough, she will tumble about the deck to look at the Southern Cross or the Aurora Borealis or things of that kind and she will catch hold of your shoulder with her dainty hand while you slander the Pleiades and take away the character of the Great Bear. After that the ship will be wrecked —who knows?—and then you will be saved."

The thought was too much for me. I broke down, buried my face in my hands and groaned aloud. Recovering myself, I went on: "You will be saved. And she.—You two alone. You will be tossed about in a small boat in the South Seas where there will be nothing to eat but you will have to take it out in sunsets. She will still look charming and will do everything in faultless taste. Sea-sickness will have no power over either. You will divide the time between looking into each other's eyes and admiring the sky and the seascape and the lovely effects when you are tossed fathoms high. By this means you will escape running into a reef, as you would do if you tried to steer, and the boat will ultimately ground upon the beach of a desert island, where you will find one white-hairy inhabitant, an old gentleman who has been marooned half a century ago by Spanish pirates and who has lived there ever since, forgotten by the world which flattered him in the days of his prosperity, and living on the charity

of his relatives, the monkeys. He will have approximated to the ape himself by this time, but the sight of you will bring back some glimmering recollection of his former state. He will remember that he used to be a priest. Simian as he is, you will not dream of doubting his words. You and your fair companion will now feel that you can be married. The thought of living in that isle in divided misery all your lives, the unspoken dread that had hung over you both like a dark cloud, will be dispelled in an instant. You will fall upon each other's necks—for the first time—and weep! In one of his lucid intervals the priest will marry you; in one of your insane intervals you will be married by the priest. While the Bachelors' Club is re-echoing with light-hearted merriment, little dreaming of the blow in store, down in that distant southern isle a man in whom it so trusted as to be willing to take two years' subscriptions from him in advance, will be trampling upon his pledges, deserting his principles, and exhibiting his unexampled dishonour to the pure round-eyed gaze of a tropical honeymoon."

I looked up. I saw that Robinson was as pale as a ghost. I also saw another thing. In my distraction I had forgotten that odious coffee. My cup was too full. I pressed Henry's hand convulsively, seized my umbrella and hurried from the room, as midnight pealed successively from six of the neighbouring steeples.

Summoned by special telegraphic whip from me, the Bachelors' Club (minus M'Gullicuddy, who was too sacred for every-day use) called in a body on Robinson the first thing the next morning, to the disgust of Mrs. Twittle. We found him calm and his luggage collected.

He wasn't going for three days yet, but he said he liked to be "packed up" in good time. He told us that he was glad we had come, because he had been thinking over what I had said the night before and he now fully felt the force of it. He had quite underrated the temptation to marry when away from the healthy contagion of the choice spirits (using the phrase in both its senses) of the Bachelors' Club and solitary amid the burning or snow-capped Sierras (he didn't know which was the right adjective). Nor had he hitherto done sufficient justice to the ocean-steamer as a marriage-trap. But the danger had only braced his nerves to sterner resistance.

My fellows all applauded to the echo and the annoyance of Mrs. Twittle. I alone was still sceptical!

'Will you bind yourself by an oath not to get married during the two years you are abroad?" I asked maliciously.

"Certainly," he said, without the slightest hesitation.

"Will you bind yourself not to get married while abroad, even though you remain away longer than you bargain for—five years, ten years, twenty years, for ever?"

"Certainly," he repeated firmly. "For myself I do not need this oath, but if it will make your minds easier I am ready to take it."

They all jumped at the idea and we bound him by a fearful oath. I still shudder at the remembrance of it. It would almost have turned my beard grey if I had been wearing it at the time. Think of all the oaths which the uninitiated fancy that Freemasons have to take—think of all the most ghastly and gruesome oaths that the morbidity of a Poe or a De Quincey could devise, and you will have some faint idea of the sort of oath which Robinson took without flinching; though the set rigidity of his muscles and the whiteness of his cheek showed he was not unconscious of the strength of his language. None of us would doubt Robinson's merest word. Even I believed in him since the rosy light thrown upon his supposed crime. Had he merely affirmed, it would have been enough. And yet there was nothing to be lost by being on the safe side. When the oath had been administered, a solemn hush fell on the room. Its awful sanctity and fearsomeness lay upon the untidy chamber like a heavy pall. We felt stifling. It was as if a horde of weird and mocking demons we had raised from Hell had their hands upon our throats. We gave one last look at Robinson's white face, then we turned and fled into the fresh air of the Bloomsbury morning. It was indeed a last look. None of us ever saw Robinson again.

* * * * *

I received a letter ten days or so after this gruesome scene, bearing the postmark of Lisbon. I uttered a cry of joy. The writing was Robinson's. During all the interval I had been in a ferment of sympathy about him. He had left his chambers on the morning of the oath and had not returned since. All my proffered sympathy at "Murdoch Brothers" was met with chilling agnosticism. I did not know the day he left England. I did not know by what ship he sailed. I was denied the consolation of waving my best handkerchief at him as he faded away into the great waters.

With fluttering heart I tore open the envelope. A piece of cardboard fell out but I did not stop to pick it up. The letter read as follows :—

"*The Occident, Eight Bells.*

"DEAR PAUL,—Just a line to inform you that I am married. You were right. The temptations to marry abroad would be too great. Since you put the thought into my head it has never gone out again. Taking that frightful oath made it worse. After it was done, I began to think how dreadful a sacrilege it would be if I were to desecrate it down in those lonely Sierras or bending over that syren in the hammock. To break that oath would not be perjury. Perjury is too mild a word for it. It would be blasphemy beyond the dreams of atheism. The more I thought about the danger of violating my oath, the more intense the danger grew. I cursed myself for having put myself within the possibility of trampling on such an oath. And yet I felt I should do it as inevitably as the moth flies to the chandelier. I was looking down a frightful abyss and I knew I should get giddy and crash down its devilish depths. The thought was too horrible for words. Was there no way of escape? Yes, one and one only. I had sworn not to get married abroad. If I could find some one to be married to before I left England, the fearful peril and temptation would be lifted from my soul. Time pressed. The vessel sailed in three days. I took out a special licence, proposed, was married, and am now sailing with my bride for a honeymoon in the Sierras.

Ever yours and hers,

HENRY ROBINSON.

"*P.S.*—Under the circumstances the Club will excuse my not forwarding those two years' subscriptions.

Instead, I shall claim my assurance money at the end of the two years, under the new rules."

The letter fell from my nerveless grasp. I picked it up, and with it the piece of cardboard. It was a photograph sandwich. I extracted the picture from between the cardboards. It was the portrait of a middle-aged but not unprepossessing lady. Across the foot ran the inscription, Inez Robinson. Through my tears I recognised the face. It was that of Inez Staunton, the well-known editress of *Woman's Wrongs,* the champion of female independence and the authoress of *Mistaken Marriages,* the great work in which the evils of all alliances not based on a thorough mutual knowledge and esteem are lucidly exhibited and analysed.

* * * * *

So Henry Robinson married and the Bachelors mourned him and had their hair cut and were not comforted until the even.

CHAPTER V.

A GENERAL COURT.

We were all so overwhelmed by this new blow that for some days we went about like married men. At last we determined to dine it down and drown the remembrance of it in a feast of reason and a flow of soul. The Eight of us assembled at the Hôtel Cavour, as the culinary resources of our Indian steward were inadequate to anything beyond sandwiches from the adjacent restaurant. After dinner we adjourned to the Club, which was fortunately only a minute off, to hold a General Court and listen to papers. The first paper was by Moses Fitz-Williams, the treasurer and legal luminary of the Club, upon "The Centenary of the High Hat." Moses is such a little spitfire that we had to nudge ourselves to keep awake. When you have an audience of seven it is not hard to fix them with your glittering eyes. Moses had the further advantage of being strabismic, so that he could subdivide the work and let each eye stand sentry over three-and-a-half of the audience. But he had to look at his manuscript sometimes; during those precious instants we snatched segments of slumber. At least the unobserved three-and-a-half of us did. We knew his essay was going to be published as a leader in *The Times*, for, like most successful barristers, Moses lived by journalism; and we thought we could just as well read it in print. But that is always the way with lecturers. They expect you to go and hear their lecture before it is published and to read it afterwards. If you don't go they never forgive you, and if you do go you never forgive them. As we composed ourselves not to listen to Moses Fitz-Williams's paper, we felt an acute envy of the waiters.

This was Moses's paper, as reprinted by kind permission of the Editor of *The Times*:—

THE CENTENARY OF THE HIGH HAT.

Every Englishman is so anxious to celebrate centenaries, from the centenary of the cholera bacillus to his own, that I am lost in astonishment at the omission to celebrate the introduction of what is unquestionably at the head of modern civilisation—I mean the high hat. Who, when he first saw this ungainly article of headgear perched on the human cranium—like Poe's raven on the bust of Pallas—but would have laughed at the prediction, "It will be all the same a hundred years hence"? And yet so it is. Science has changed the face of the world; fashions have come and cut and come again; dynasties have been o'ertoppled; faiths and forms have changed. But the chimney-pot hat remains, and still lifts its glossy glories to the wondering heavens. The suns and snows of a century have fallen on it in vain; it still stands, like some mighty Alp, serene and steadfast in the indomitable pride of its lofty supremacy. High hats perish; but the high hat remains, immortal, undyeing. Demure in black or frisky in white, squat with broad brim or rakish with curly, it is still the unchallenged monarch of the hats of Philistia, before which all other hats remove their wearers in respectful homage. Its surface manner may be beaverish or silky, but its power is felt. For every year of the century has but added to its sovereignty, till now it is become the seal and symbol of respectability, and the hall-rack mark of a gentleman. And yet at first its meaning was quite other. It was a reaction against Benjamin Franklin's simple Quaker's hat, and he who wore it was stamped as a man of progressive views, and of liberalism to the race of hatters. Short people, no doubt, jumped at it, for it made them rise in the world by many inches at once. And then tall people were naturally driven to it to assert their superiority, and to restore, or rather to re-dress, the balance. As for the medium-sized people, how could they hope to make headway against a fashion everybody else was adopting? Thus the hat was enthroned in supreme sovereignty above all human crowns; till the fierce republicans and socialists, for whom nothing is sacred, began to revolt against its brow-beating tyranny. They indulged in high treason and low hats. They said "the high hat must be crushed"; and even the commercial co-operation of the operatic Gibus could not satisfy their anarchistic aspirations. Englishmen, they cried, could not be slaves; and so long as this foot of cylinder was on their heads they were but as worms that grovelled. So the lowly hat became what the high hat had started life as—a mark of heterodoxy and progressive views. William Morris walked across Hammersmith Bridge in a billycock, Stepniak sported a sombrero, and John Burns was a man of straw. And the disciples clothed their heads in their several ways till the funereal funnel became incompatible with sound views on the doctrine of rent or accurate conceptions of the functions of capital. And then one day there arose a bold revolutionary thinker, who, in the columns of the defunct English Socialist Magazine, *To-Day*, asked why low hats should be the badge of all their tribe. And the eccentric editor, who himself wore a shockingly good high hat, rejoiced and echoed, "Why indeed?" And then there raged "The Battle of the Hats." The high hat has survived *To-Day*, and it will survive to-morrow. It is ugly and it is heavy and it is surcharged with prosaic modernity. You cannot imagine Homer in a high hat, nor Shakespeare, nor even Hamlet. But Mr. Grundy will long go on wearing it; because his wife orders it. And you cannot get a divorce from Mrs. Grundy.

The silence that followed Fitz-Williams's last words roused us from our reverie. We discussed his "High Hat," and crushed it and sat upon it. It was extremely rude of him to make such personal remarks. Did not Oliver Green wear a high hat; did not O'Roherty?

But even worse than this insinuation of respectability against his fellow-members was the implicit coupling of their names with Mrs. Grundy! As if a Bachelor could be linked even metaphorically with a married woman! Joseph Fogson, M.D., B.Sc., intimated that if the discussion bore out its early promise, there would be no time for him to read his scientific paper. The reminder that we had to face more papers so unnerved us that for a moment we were struck dumb; before that moment was over, Fogson had commenced his paper:—

THE RED TAPE-WORM.

A comatose creature, of the *genus* bore and constrictor, not to be confounded with its prey the "Serpentine" species, or the worm that turns in Hyde Park. Some varieties—especially the English—attain a monstrous growth. The body is composed of multitudinous rings of an official character, each spiral stripe resembling a piece of red tape, whence the name. Its heavy, sluggish breath fascinates all who come near, and reduces them to a state of torpor as deep as its own. Its grip is fatal. Encircling its victim in its horrible folds it crushes the heart out of him and squeezes every drop of blood out of his veins. Living in a Paradise of its own creation, this sluggard snake is, of course, able to speak. Its voice is harsh and sibilant. What it says is circumlocutory and periphrastic. Its sentences are as involved as its folds. It covers up truth with a surface of slaver. It makes promises or rather it promises to make promises. It never performs unless under compulsion; and then it is so long about it that the people who yearn to witness the performance are dead and buried before it begins. It is hard of hearing. So languid are its nerve-currents that if you try to set up a sensation at its tail, decades elapse before the message travels to the brain. Its flesh has the gift of persistent vitality. Hack it for months with pointed pens, grind it for years in the Press, lethargic life still lingers in its slimy sinuosities. Cut it up how you will, each fragment assumes independent existence; with the luxuriousness that comes of independence. Its maw swallows up millions. It never disgorges. It cannot do wrong and it never does right.

Loud applause greeted the tail of this short tapeworm. Life would be so much longer if art and literature were shorter. Fogson mistook the meaning of our applause and announced, amid ominous silence, that at the next meeting he would read a paper on two species of Ring-Worms—the Dramatic Ring-Worm (*vermis annulatus theatralis*), and the City Ring-Worm (*vermis annulatus pecuniarius*). After that Israfel Mondego got up and left. He said he had to sing at a conversazione at Lady Partington's in Piccadilly. We were not sorry, because Israfel had done little else than stroke his beautiful moustache gloomily the whole time, and had contributed nothing to the discussion but his ears. He was always saturnine, sad, and picturesque—especially after dinner—and never said funny things like the rest of us. He was the only member of the Club absolutely devoid of a sense of humour. When he was gone, Mandeville Brown observed that he had found out why Israfel Mondego was in so much request at conversaziones—it was because his singing was such a stimulus to conversation. We all laughed. Mandeville expected it. But we all knew in our hearts that it was quite untrue, for no lady would have dropped a pin while Israfel was warbling his erotic nothings. That was why we hated him. The only virtue we could discover in Israfel was that he was a Bachelor.

O'Roherty took advantage of our good-humour to ask whether any of us had been round the studios, the Spring Art Epidemic being near. Green incautiously replied that he had—when they were not square—but that in some cases, where champagne was on tap, the studios had gone round him. It then transpired that O'Roherty had readv an oration upon "Show Sunday."

Determining to have a feast of reason is one thing; but on the top of a heavy dinner you find it rather indigestible. We solaced ourselves by waking up the waiters and demanding lemon-squashes.

"One never knows," said O'Roherty musingly, as if he had never thought of it before, "what a bore Art is till

SHOW SUNDAY.

Spring comes and your artistic friends send you cards to view their pictures. Why they do it can only be explained by their beastly vanity. Imagine an author sending out cards to his friends to come and laugh at his newest old joke, or to attend a reading of his great work on "The Conservation of the Police Force"; or "The Renaissance in Kamtchatka, 1120 A.D." You can always write a friend a gushing letter about poems or a novel, but there is no call on you to read them. Why you should be dragged on Show Sunday to see what will either be visible at the Academy or won't, is beyond my comprehension. An outsider would imagine that an artist would be disconcerted if his picture were rejected after he had cackled over it to his friends! By no means! Acceptance covers him with glory but rejection puts him at once on the level of Turner and other misunderstood gentlemen of the brush, and he feels certain that Providence is raising a Ruskin for him, somewhere, somehow.

But I must admit that there are advantages in seeing a picture in the artist's presence. I do not refer so much to the excellent exercise it affords in mastering your emotions, as to the fact that you are provided with a ready-made guide to the painter's intentions, and that, without having the trouble of consulting a catalogue, you are able to learn whether the picture represents Amsterdam by Moonlight or the Rape of the Sabines.

When you find that the expression on a cardinal's face is intended for agonised remorse, and when you further learn that the face in question is not a cardinal's but an Egyptian mummy's, you feel a rush of æsthetic rapture in the contemplation of the Lovely and the True, which you couldn't feel when you were under the impression that the mummy was a jolly old church dignitary. There is nothing so troublesome to remember as a classical legend. To this day I don't know whether Ulysses killed Æneas or Æneas killed Ulysses. I only know that one killed the other, or they both committed suicide, or were killed by somebody else, or ought to have been killed, or something of that sort, and that they were called "pious" for doing it. So it's quite a treat to go and see a fellow's "Atalanta and Pizarro," or his "Minerva's Farewell to Mazzini," and have him there to tell you the exact circumstances of the case. How often in an art gallery have I longed to be Dr. William Smith! I wonder, though, whether he knows his own classical dictionaries.

Mandeville Brown hummed applause. "Of course not," he interposed. "A man who has written a learned book is like a man who has taken a degree in art or medicine, or crammed up for the civil service. Once the book is published, or the examination past, he lets bygones be bygones. But what I have often wanted to know is why the Academy "Private View" is so called? Because it's not Private or because it's not a View? If it is both, what is Show-up Sunday?

"A private private view, of course," observed Fogson, M.D., B.Sc., rather querulously.

"Your private views are just what you must keep to yourself on these occasions," said Mandeville. "But how much people care about art is shown by the newspapers, which give more space to the description of the fashionable ladies at the private views than to the pictures."

"The fashionable ladies are often the notablest works of art in the galleries," said O'Roherty, "and the best painted."

"And the most deserving of hanging by the Academy they patronise by *not* paying the shilling of the vulgar," said Mandeville, nettled at O'Roherty's taking the epigram out of his mouth. One does not lead up to jokes for the sake of one's friends. O'Roherty, unabashed, continued to recount his artistic experiences. He described the pictures of the Forty, most of whom it appeared were merely flattering themselves by imitating themselves. He also read us some statistics of the number of pinafores, wooden chairs, rivers, cows, Greek maidens, roses, dogs, buhl cabinets, snuff-boxes, sand-spades, buckets and other common objects of the sea-shore he had seen in his travels, together with an inventory of the wardrobe, and wound up with a breathless description of his visit to an unknown artist. "From the pretentious studios of Belgravia and the palaces of art of St. John's Wood," said he, "I took the 'bus to the Euston Road. Here in an attic I saw a poor struggling artist putting the last touches to a picture on which all his hopes were staked. He had not been trained in the schools—he knew naught of the conventionalities of academic art. His aged father leant over the oils and made them water-colours with his tears. Need I say the picture was atrocious? So, as I am certain it will be in the Academy, there is no need for me to expatiate on its beauties, as I should have done had there been any. But any one who wants to see pink sea-water and ultramarine cornfields may be recommended to buy it." This unexpected conclusion restored our good humour. Even M'Gullicuddy smiled. But Mandeville's smile was less genial.

"I will wager a sovereign you are colour-blind, O'Roherty," he said.

O'Roherty looked abashed. "Nonsense," he said. "How do you know?"

This made us roar and pacified Mandeville. We felt more convinced than ever that O'Roherty was an Irishman, though we dared not tell him so.

At this point M'Gullicuddy reminded us that we had again to face the problem of the falling-off in our membership, and he called upon the secretary to make a statement upon the situation.

Mandeville Brown arose with a twinkle in his eye, and a bundle of letters in his hand. "I have received a number of applications for membership," said he. We thumped applause and asked why we had not been told before dinner. Without replying, Mandeville continued, "For the first time in our history, ladies are asking to join the Bachelors' Club."

There was a dead silence. Then Moses asked: "Married or single?"

"Both. The married ladies base their claim upon the fact that they are bachelors of science, art, or music. The single ladies appear to argue that 'bachelor' embraces 'spinster,' just as 'man' notoriously embraces 'woman,' according to Acts of Parliament."

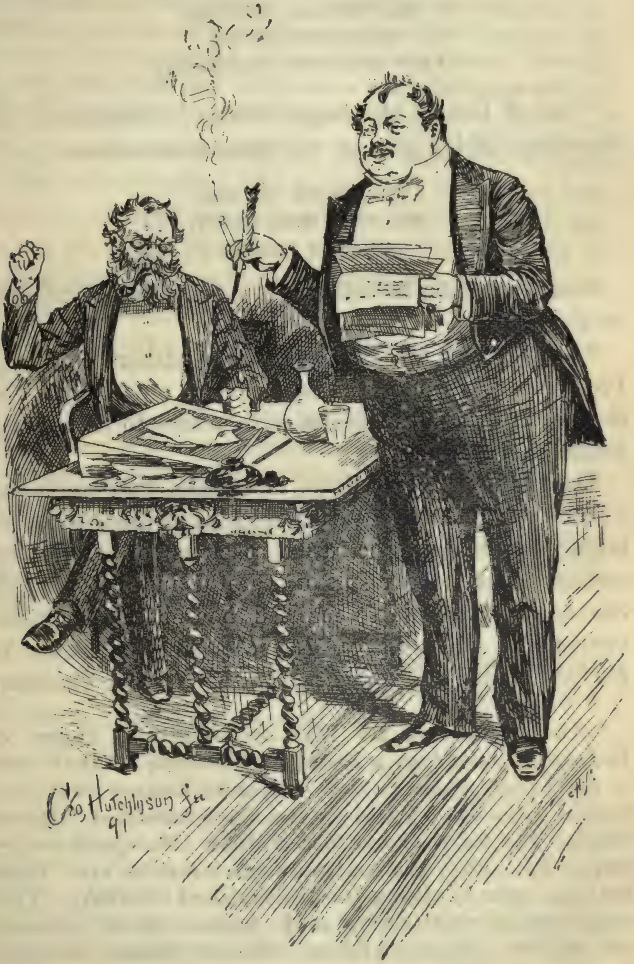
"Quibbles, quibbles!" I cried excitedly.

"Order, order, mon," said M'Gullicuddy. "When your house is on fire, you maun snatch up a petticoat if you canna find your breeks."

We were all aghast. Mandeville went on. "The list of applicants comprises (I take them as they come)—

MISS SOPHONISBA DE WALLACE,
HERR BLARNIUM,
MR. VANDYKE BROWNE,
THE MARCHIONESS OF MUDDLETON,

Here we all drew a long breath, and O'Roherty a champagne cork.



SIGNOR GAMMONIO,
ESMERALDA GREEN,
MR. BULLYVER BIDDLEBERRY,
MR. WILLIAM OLDSCORE,
MISS PENTONVILLE,
LADY ARAMINTA CHAPELTON,

—"one of Israfel Mondego's friends," interpolated the Secretary, taking pity on our open-mouthedness.

MR. OSWALD ODDLER,
MR. JOSEF SPRINITKOFF,
MR. TOM TALKEY.

The pessimistic Secretary resumed his seat, evidently in high spirits.

"I shall now, in accordance with custom," said the President, "call upon the Secretary to report upon the character of these candidates with a view to their being seconded, if satisfactory."

The plump little pessimist rose again, amid applause. "Mr. President and gentlemen, I have the honour of laying before you the usual packets of condensed essence of life, the result of careful inquiry through Stubbs and respectable married householders, supplemented by the *Peerage, The Gazette, The Review of Reviews,* Galton's *Genealogies,* and the *Newgate Calendar.*

"MISS SOPHONISBA DE WALLACE.—Married. Degree of Bachelor of Music from a Norwegian University. Latest lessee of the Novelty Theatre. Like Bismarck's decayed tooth, is of German extraction. Talent for the boards hereditary. Mother familiar with the plank-bed from girlhood. Managerial instinct derived from father, who was born with a cast in his eye. Began her stage career by playing Chambermaids and Old Harry. First engagement of importance was to Mr. Seymour Smith, a respectable solicitor. Marriage a failure. Miss de Wallace went back to live with her mother, who had in the meantime been appointed oakum-selector to the queen. Age uncertain. Twenty-first birthday celebrated last Monday. In figure inclined to *embonpoint* and want of balance at her banker's. Complexion charming, and her colour comes and goes in a way that betokens the vivacity of her disposition and the contents of her toilette-table drawer. Plays all the chief parts in the plays she produces and collaborates with the most celebrated dramatic authors in writing them."

We thought we would not have Miss De Wallace for her mother's sake. We could easily fill up the four vacancies without her. If Henry Robinson had not left us, we might have voted for her for the sake of his manuscript plays. I determined not to fail to write to him of the chance he had missed by his folly. Mandeville Brown ran his pen through her name and resumed—

"HERR BLARNIUM.—Bachelor. Also a German. Something (not very particular) in the City. Prime mover in the recent corner in corner-men. A black business. Talent in finance inherited from his father, who was one of the earliest discoverers of kleptomania. Of Herculean strength, derived from his mother—an adept at shoplifting. Speaks German detestably. French as well as his mother-tongue. A gourmand and loves all his accounts well cooked."

We thought we would not have Herr Blarnium for his father's sake. Mandeville Brown ran his pen through his name and resumed—

"MR. VANDYKE BROWNE.—Bachelor. Received his art education in the atelier of a Paris dentist, where he learnt to draw teeth, customers, and his salary. Afterwards served a term with an oilman in Camberwell, and completed his education by making the acquaintance of several models in the shady groves of the Evangelist. Greatest as a colourist. His nose, pipe, and statements of fact are *chefs d'œuvre*. First great picture exhibited in back drawing-room of intended father-in-law's lodgings in Stoke

Newington. Led to the breaking-off of the engagement. Promise of his early career has been carried out; so have some of those who have been privileged to view his pictures. Main works on exhibit in his studio—Classic: The Sneeze of the Serpent; Apollo on Olympus; Juno on Washing Day: Death of Mother Hubbard. Landscape: Under the Strawberry Trees; Sunset on Saffron Hill; Bathing-Machines by Moonlight. Genre: Study of an old Tin Pot; The Dustman's Daughter; Whisky and Water (a study of *Still* Life)."

We thought we would not have Mr. Vandyke Browne for the sake of his intended father-in-law. Browne's matrimonial escutcheon had been sullied. The Secretary drew his pen through the name and resumed—

"THE MARCHIONESS OF MUDDLETON.—Married. Bachelor of Arts. Diploma from Dublin. Just started millinery and linen drapery establishment. The Marquess strongly objected. Said she spent enough on dress already. Among the features of her bonnets are to be beaks of birds from her husband's *battues.* Will sell everything except underclothing, the sale of which she deems immoral and reprehensible. *Gazette* has her bankruptcy ready in type. Tall fierce-looking beauty with green spectacles. In conversation slow and stuttering, but what she does say is beneath contempt. Extremely musical giggle, but a warm human heart beats beneath her dainty lace and occasionally registers 32° Fahrenheit. Fond of Wagner and cough-drops."

We thought we would not have her ladyship for her husband's sake. We did not want scenes with him. He was too grand for us to kick downstairs if he came inquiring after her with a horse-whip. Mandeville ran his pen through her name and resumed—

"SIGNOR GAMMONIO.—Bachelor. Baritone. Very poor in early life—weaned at the age of six months. As an infant had a very musical cry, though no one appreciated the music of the future in it. Once took part in an opera in the Isle of Man. In conversation delightfully piquant; the slang dictionary toils after him in vain.

The Signor's favourite drink is water ; but from a spirit of self-denial he confines himself to whisky. Is a man of true artistic *bonhomie* and will borrow half-crowns even from the Philistines."

We thought we would not have Signor Gammonio for the sake of his creditors. Mandeville ran his pen through the name and resumed—

"MISS ESMERALDA GREEN.—Spinster. The popular authoress of *Boometh as a Bumble Bee* and other unreadable novels. Short stout spinster, with the languid, aristocratic manner of a Persian cat and the moustache of an English guardsman. An instance of precocious genius. Her distaste for grammar apparent even before she could speak plainly ; and when she could, she became an awful liar. Talent from side of father, one of the most inveterate advertisement canvassers that ever drew breath and the long-bow. Never writes except on paper. Her chief work is done at the British Museum, and nothing puts her out so much as the Librarian and his mercenaries at closing time. 'Esmy,' as her friends call her, is very fond of pastry, and they attribute her success to puffs. Takes little sleep, and even when sleeping protests against it through her nose."

We thought we would not have Miss Green for the sake of her readers. Mandeville ran his pen through her name and resumed—

"MR. BULLYVER BIDDLEBERRY.—Bachelor. Member of the Flamingo Club. Originally a collier's lad, he worked his way up to the top of the mine and ran off to London. Here he bought a bad half-crown to commence his career on and sold a publican. Soon after this his unequalled slogging powers were first demonstrated in the great city in a battle-royal with a woman. Talent like this could not go unheeded, and Biddleberry was immediately taken up by that generous patron of all that is elevated—the policeman. From the stone jug he passed to the prize-ring, where his claret-tapping capacities brought him fame, fortune, and a host of friends in the peerage. Purchased a stable and in his very first year carried off the blue ribbon of the turf by feeding the favourite with corn-plaster. Favourite occupations—figuring in divorce suits and singing drivellishly dirty comic songs at the Flamingo champagne fights. Reason for applying—he is member of all the Clubs that will admit him.

"*N.B.*—Since writing his application he has died."

"Alas!" said O'Roherty, "we are but as shadows in the hands of the reaper and even prize-fighters must melt away as gossamers before the breeze. May the earth lie as lightly on him as he lied on it."

We said "Amen," but thought we would not have Bullyver Biddleberry for the sake of his undertaker. Our Secretary drew his pen through the name and resumed—

"Mr. WILLIAM OLDSCORE.—Composer. Widower, though representing himself as a bachelor——"

"Enough," thundered M'Gullicuddy, turning as red as a turkey-cock in his indignation.

"Oh, let's hear what further depths of villainy he has sunk to," pleaded Fitz-Williams.

We did our best to pacify our outraged President, and the Secretary went on—

"No better example of hereditary musical genius could be adduced, for his mother was a wholesale dealer in organ-grinders' monkeys and his deceased wife's sister was music-mistress at a deaf and dumb home. Is still a young man, having been born in Newington Butts. In person is florid and stumpy, and his upper lip is prematurely bald, but the light of genius that shines in his glass eye atones for all. Tastes naïve and simple. He can sit listening to his own music for hours at a stretch."

We thought we would not have Mr. William Oldscore for the sake of his deceased wife's sister. Mandeville drew his pen through the name and resumed—

"MISS PENTONVILLE.—Spinster. Charming woman, with lovely hair and without a fine Roman nose, which she lost in a street accident fifty-three years ago. An ardent patroness of masked balls. Is now forty-five and considerably in advance of her age. Is possessed of considerable debts in her own right; has the courage of her opinions, and a good opinion of her courage; and, having also an atrocious French accent and a fondness for underdone steaks, aspires to represent Cripplegate on the County Council."

We thought we would not have Miss Pentonville for the sake of her constituents. What a blessing it was that we had so many candidates to select our four from that we could waste them with royal carelessness and extravagance. Mandeville drew his pen through her name and resumed—

"Lady Araminta Chapelton.—Spinster. Her 'At Homes' are among the most successful functions of the London season and would be more so if she were out. At these receptions all that is most famous in literary and art circles, all that is most beautiful and noble in London society, is conspicuous by its absence. Lady Araminta is herself a wonderful talker and has a heap of reminiscences at her finger-ends, where those familiar with the language of her afflicted class may read them. Although she is deaf, few things are more musical than her laugh. The scratch of a slate-pencil is, however, one of them. Chiefly employed in attending on an aged pug-dog. In politics has always sided warmly with her brother, the Hon. George Walters, whose premature decease before birth was a heavy blow to his country and the family 'Gamp.' Her ladyship is still on the right side of sixty and her buoyant vitality is only depressed by the dread that she is among those whom the gods love."

We thought we would rather not have Lady Araminta for the sake of her pug-dog. Mandeville shrugged his shoulders, and, drawing his pen through her name, resumed—

"Oswald Oddler.—Bachelor. Among the men about town, without whom no première is complete, he undoubtedly holds a first stall. He talks entirely in epigrams, of the species which he has himself defined as 'pertinent impertinences.' Should you send him a private letter he will publish it in his paper and charge you with a craving for publicity and with the cost of setting it up in type. Is awfully smart because he is often made to by the victims of his epigrams or their authors. Boasts that he writes plays under *noms de plume* and managerial compulsion, but the statement, like the Indian juggler and the loafer's wife, is entirely unsupported. Is famous for championing the undivided skirt for gentlemen and has a sympathetic admiration for the human calf. In spite of his intellectual activity is physically weak, and is only kept going by overdoses of insect-powder. He will soon be quite gone. His death will leave a blank in journalism which it is to be hoped nobody will draw."

We thought we would rather not have Oswald for the sake of his physicians. Mandeville imperturbably drew his pen through the name and resumed—

"JOSEF SPRINITZKOFF.—Bachelor. Now living in retirement in a back bedroom in the Old Kent Road, but once regarded as the great European firebrand. Indeed, his impassioned articles in the *Magnonominal Review* still serve to feed the flames of discontent and the domestic hearth. Has inherited his revolutionary tendencies from his mother, who was a famous waltzer. His very first entry into the world was characterised by a wail of discontent, and as his nurse was in the habit of mounting through the attic trap-door to sun herself on the tiles, he cried aloud from his housetop at a very early age. Josef was carefully educated as a conspirator. Is familiar with all branches of the profession, not excluding the gallows' tree, from which he has had many escapes wanting in breadth. His hair is a fiery red, of the exact hue of the sun seen through a November fog, though, as it was cut off in a fever, its present whereabouts are unknown. Kings call him a bald, bad man. His eyes are twins, and traces of a prehistoric smallpox cast a halo of holeyness over his martyr's countenance. The great disciple of Rousseau loves to return to the bosom of his mother earth and may often be seen rolling in the gutter. On such occasions he is visibly moved by the brutal Force of a priest-ridden plebs. Is only five feet high but dislikes whelks."

We thought we would rather not have Josef Sprinitzkoff for the sake of the police. The Secretary silently drew his pen through the name and resumed—

"MR. TOM TALKEY.—Bachelor. For many years director of Ananias's Agency. He originally studied for the law and has taken silk. On the expiration of his sentence for this offence toured the country in a wig and a musical troupe. Is a staunch foe of Temperance and has pleaded the rights of Drink at many a bar. One of his legs is wooden but he has never written for the magazines. His head also is a chip of the old block. Nothing false ever comes from his lips except his teeth at bedtime. Only thing he earned honestly in his life was his father's dying curse, which he invested in railway stock."

We thought we would rather not have Tom Talkey for our own sakes. Then Mandeville Brown smiled sadly and sat down.

"Go on! go on!" we said encouragingly. We felt kindly towards Mandeville Brown. He had extracted the essence of the candidates' histories very neatly indeed and by his skilful presentation of the facts had saved us the painful distractions of dubiety. We could not be too careful as to whom we admitted into the Bachelors' Club.

"There are no more," he said. We looked at each other.

"Nonsense! why, there must be dozens," we replied incredulously.

"Look!" said the little pessimist laconically. He held up his list, a succession of black parallel lines. There was not one candidate in the running: they were all scratched.

We were intensely annoyed with our stupid Secretary and called him names by which he had not been christened. We inquired why he had not told us we were being reduced to the extremities of the list, and stated that he had sacrificed Truth to Epigram. We also called his attention to the fact that the Devil was not so black as he was painted. Mandeville replied that the old gentleman had not presented himself as a candidate, though strictly eligible and a seasoned bachelor. M'Gullicuddy then called for silence and another lemon squash, and suggested that the names of the male candidates whose characters, as bachelors, were purest should be written on slips of paper, put in a High Hat (which, he remarked severely, was highly useful for such contingencies by virtue of its depth), and four should be drawn out by Moses Fitz-Williams. This being done, the following gentlemen were declared duly elected as candidates :—

MR. OSWALD ODDLER.
MR. VANDYKE BROWNE.
SIGNOR GAMMONIO.
MR. TOM TALKEY.

The Secretary was forthwith instructed to write to them, asking them to forward the usual non-marriage certificates, and enclosing a copy of the rules up to date.

* * * * *

After reading the minutes at the next formal meeting, Mandeville stated that he had received replies from the three first-named gentlemen, withdrawing their applications as they had been misled as to the nature of the assurance system in connection with the Club. As for Tom Talkey, he had in the interim again joined the Junior Convicts' Club at Portland.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FALL OF ISRAFEL.

"And the Angel Israfel whose heart-strings are a lute and who has the sweetest voice of all God's creatures."—*The Koran.*

THE Bachelors' Club was crammed to its utmost capacity. There was a smoking-concert on, and every Bachelor had availed himself of the privilege of bringing two bachelors with him. Some had even broken the spirit of the by-law by going outside again to fetch in two more. There was always great curiosity to see us on these occasions, as Joseph Fogson, M.D., B.Sc., settled with the steward and the guests always felt there was a scientific flavour about the whisky he paid for. But this time on account of its being the May concert the crowd was greater than ever, as everybody could mention to his relatives that he was going to a May meeting.

In not a few instances I suspected that the bachelors introduced for these occasions only were no better than they should be. I did not see the fun of being wedged uncomfortably between two probably married men, or of having the room made unbearably hot by bachelors of questionable *bona fides*; for so crowded was the Club that smoking was going on even in the smoking-room. Still it was not my business to expose my fellow-members or their guests; and I make it a rule to mind my own business. It is the only way of making it pay.

The main attraction of these smoking-concerts was the singing of Israfel Mondego.

Israfel Mondego was the greatest celebrity of whom the Club could boast. He was one of the most popular singers of the day. Thousands hung upon his lips and his eyebrows. His voice was nothing to speak of, still less to sing with; but it was well-trained and many ladies considered him the *primo tenore* of the world. He also wrote and composed most of his own songs—they were always in the minor. He was the most minor poet and musician ever known. The sale of these drawing-room ballads far surpassed that of Beethoven's works, and as he got a royalty on them as well as on those alien compositions he merely sang, Israfel made a good thing out of sweet sad nonsense. Israfel was sweetly pretty; he had dark and rolling eyes, a passionate moustache, and ineffably melancholic hair. Israfel's advent to our ranks was a great accession of strength to us and gave us a good advertisement. For a man who could have thrown his scented handkerchief where he would in the selectest circles of beauty and fashion to dedicate himself to the Higher Bachelorhood, was indeed a triumph for the cause. We gloried in Israfel's membership, and the only bitter in our cup (as distinct from our glass) was that he would sing at our smoking-concerts. It was not that we could not bear the burden of his song—Love, Love, Love; on the contrary, we welcomed Israfel Mondego's lyrics as a strong ally in our war against the tender emotion. But Israfel's singing imposed a strain upon our self-command which marred the ease and abandon that are the essence of smoking-concerts. When he turned up the whites of his eyes to express hopeless yearning, or flew up the gamut on the wings of some screamingly serious emotion, we did not like to laugh and give away his dignity in the presence of our guests. They, too, I soon found, exercised an equal self-control for the sake of the hosts. It was really quite painful for both parties. This was why Mondego's singing was, as I have said, the main attraction of our smoking-concerts. The guests, who were pretty nearly always the same, came to see if the members would laugh first; the members came to see if their guests would laugh first. It was a highly exciting race; but the result was always a dead silence. The conclusion of Mondego's songs was always greeted with immense salvoes of applause; after which, at a decent interval of a minute, the audience always got immensely jocular and Homeric bursts of laughter, seemingly independent of one another, resounded through the two rooms.

To-night Israfel was in fine form. He sat himself down before the hired piano and ran his perfumed hand over the ivory keys by way of prelude. Then he sang his very latest success. None of us had heard it before. None of us had the slightest inkling of what was to come. It is well that fate stretches a veil before the future, well most of all for thee, O M'Gullicuddy!

Israfel sang—

THE ISLAND OF LOVE.

O fly with me where amaranthine blossoms
Are pale with passion's flame,
Where larger moons and lither-limb'd opossums
Know naught of sin and shame.
Too long the world's cold teaching hath opprest us,
My sweetest, sweet sweetheart.
In vain we schooled our hearts to be asbestos,
We cannot, may not, part.

God built an isle where mystic shadow hovers,
Across the slumbrous seas,
The dim, enchanted isle of love and lovers,
And drowsy melodies.
A dream of restful roses, poppies, lilies,
And lips that lie on lips,
And eyes that burn like purple daffodillies,
While Time unnoted slips.

Come, sweet, where day and night are one with twilight,
And breathing one with bliss,
Where sun and moon and stars shall faint in thy light,
And life be one long kiss ——

At this point a dreadful thing happened. As the "long kiss" died away up the ceiling, Israfel's eyes kept on ecstatically examining the chandelier, while his dainty tapering fingers mechanically played the accompaniment. Suddenly an awful roar shook the air—violent as the rattle of celestial artillery. I shall never forget the horror of the moment. Inextinguishable laughter had seized on the Bachelors' Club. The Club was one chaos of convulsive forms. The Bachelors were laughing, the bachelors were laughing, M'Gullicuddy was laughing, the dusky Hindoo steward was laughing, and even the waiters, who had been crowded on to the landing, were laughing. The worst of it was that the race between the Bachelors and the bachelors had again ended in a dead heat. You couldn't tell which had begun first.

Who has not been in a solemn situation in which he wanted to laugh and dared not? You bite your lips, turn your head away, think of all the sacred or nasty things in the world, and at last almost forget you want to laugh. Then you begin to fear your neighbour has not equal self-control. The very air seems full of Mephistophelian gigglings. You hear or divine strange, suspicious gurgles all around you. A tickling electric current seems to run round and connect you with a battery of irreverence; your sides shake silently till they ache; you stuff your handkerchief into your mouth; you turn red and nearly burst your cheeks; your diaphragm feels contracted and your ribs seem distended. At last your neighbour explodes and you follow suit feeling that you must have your laugh, though you swing for it. Even so was the air of the Bachelors' Club heavily charged with laughing gas when Israfel sang.

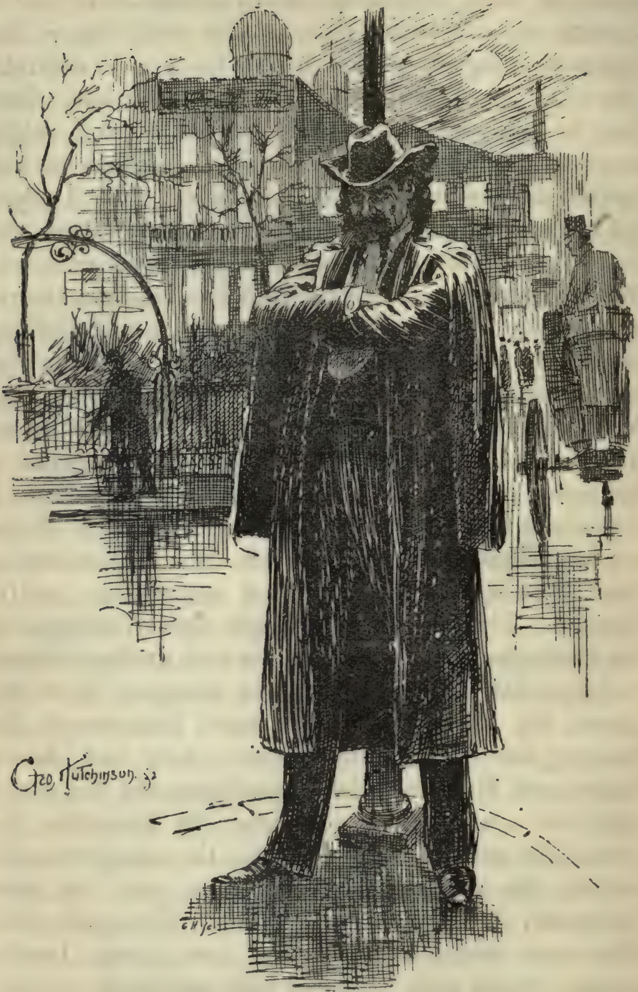
Who broke down first will never be known, but as Mondego revelled in the "long kiss," ogling us meantime as though we were old women, the pent-up laughter of months broke forth, apparently from all points of the compass simultaneously. The Bachelors' Club was doubled up like a collapsible garden chair.

We were all so surprised at the long expected having happened at last, that it was some seconds before we could realise that it had happened. Then, as we all became simultaneously aware that we were laughing, we felt that we ought to feel ashamed and frozen with horror, but now the thought that we were laughing was so exquisitely funny that we could do nothing but roar on. So irresistible was the wave of laughter that we were swept helplessly onwards for full five minutes, and even when we were left stranded on the shores of breathlessness, battered and shattered wrecks, rippling eddies and after-waves of merriment caught us in the sides and threatened to drag us back again into the great gulfs and raging torrents of cachinnation. But the force of the tide grew feebler and feebler, gradually the mirth subsided to a spent snigger. Then sadness fell on the scene, and to cover our embarrassment we picked up the broken glass and the pipes with which the floor was strewn; we looked shamefacedly at each other and realised what we had done; the charm of the smoking concerts was at an end; never again would we Bachelors and bachelors meet with the common consciousness and joy of our guilty secret. Even if Israfel remained in the Club after this deadly insult, it was doubtful if he would ever make us smile again.

But long before this stage Israfel Mondego had picked his way disdainfully through our writhing forms and left the Club. As he went through the door he looked back. The expression of his face was peculiar and extensive. Even I could not interpret it. It was a fine blend of assorted emotions. His face was like a composite photograph taken from persons in various stages of sorrow and scorn.

When I came to myself that look was haunting me.

It was, I thought, the look of a man who might go and do something desperate. We had wounded him deeply; who could say to what length he might carry his retaliation? Perhaps he would even pay his subscription and resign his membership of the Club. I felt that we ought not to have allowed him to go from among us thus. Common decency demanded a word of apology, an expression of sympathy with him in his righteous indignation; but it was too late to overtake him now. And yet—the effort should be made. Perhaps he had driven off in a hansom; if so, I might ascertain the direction he had given; perhaps he had walked on towards Piccadilly, in which case I might yet come upon him. Besides, Moses Fitz-Williams was just going to recite, and when, in his tragic moments, Moses's eyes crossed over the bridge of his nose, the result was too tragic. I slipped downstairs, and muffling my throat with my false beard (for the night air was chill after the stifling heat of the Club) I looked around. With difficulty I suppressed a cry of astonishment. There, barely two yards from me, leaning against a lamp-post in the soft May night, was Israfel Mondego. I drew back into the passage. His arms were folded and the lamp-light falling full on his features disclosed a face working under deep and apparently painful thought. There he stood in tragic dignity, wrapped in his Inverness cape as in a toga, his dark eyebrows drawn together, his beautiful moustache drooping in sombre gloom, his lips twitching. Around him surged the bustling life of Leicester Square: 'Arry and 'Arriet, Henry and Henrietta, the meerschaum and the penny cigar, the clay and the cigarette, the journalist, the music-hall artiste, the policeman, the conspirator, the barber, the organ-grinder off duty, and the mere foreigner; but he heeded nothing. He stood silent like some better-executed and less grimy London statue. Small boys tendered him sanguinary evening papers; cripples armed with two boxes of matches invoked the blessing of Providence on his head; kind



THERE HE STOOD IN TRAGIC DIGNITY.

gentlemen with red noses offered to put their hansoms at his disposal; flower-girls pressed to decorate his button-hole; but he never looked up.

My bosom thrilled with pity! I dimly realised the tragedy going on in the breast of the curled darling of the drawing-room! Sneered at, derided in his own Club, he, before whom every head, I mean woman, bowed in adoration, what a terrible shock it must have been to him! What a blessing that, in spite of all his cantabile confessions, there was nothing wrong with his heart! How if he had fallen dead at our foolish feet!

I wondered what would be the result of his meditations under that street-lamp. Would he call us out one by one and shoot us down like dogs or married men? Little less seemed proportionate to his dignity and passionate romanticism. He was always so very un-English, even it was believed carrying this weakness so far as to be born in Brazil, of a family of old hidalgos. Yes, he would invite us to spend a day with him on the Continent—perhaps in the Island of Love where the police organisation did not appear to be very effective—and there he would despatch us with punctuality and speed, and waste our return tickets. That was the worst of Mondego. He had no sense of humour. A man with a sense of humour would have been tickled by the situation himself; no he wouldn't, he would never have sung that song. Mondego had a sense of honour instead—which is an appalling misfortune for a man, especially when it is of the foreign variety. His admirers called him a child of the sun; which appears to mean that he had had a sort of sun-stroke when a child, which left him crying for the moon all the rest of his unnatural life. He was understood to be always asking for Love and the Beautiful in Art and Nature, and seeing that he got it. A morbid over-strung hyper-sensitive temperament like Israfel's was not the sort to make light of this laughing matter; oh, if he had only been like me who can see a joke in everything, except the English comic papers!

A fracas arising from the unceremonious exit of a gentleman from the Alhambra swept Mondego from his lamp-post and aroused him from his reverie. He looked round vaguely, then instinctively drew out his watch. It was safe; as he put it back he caught sight of the time. His eyes lit up as if with sudden resolution, he jumped into a passing hansom and acknowledged the polite attentions of the gamin with a charming smile and a sixpence. I could not tell which glittered more, the coin or Israfel's teeth. His smile reflected itself in my face. The cloud was dispelled—the worst was over. Mondego *had* a little sense of humour after all. He had been piqued and chagrined, but he was not such a silly romantic ass as he looked—this was what I thought in my blindness, as I turned to go back to the smoking-concert. Moses Fitz-Williams's recitation must be over by now.

"Whitechapel, sir? Yes, sir." The words impinged weirdly on my ear and set my nerves thrilling afresh. Could it be Mondego's driver who had thus spoken? I looked out again. Yes, there was only one hansom within ear-shot.

What was Mondego going to do in Whitechapel? If he had given a ducal address in Belgravia, if he had even mentioned Marlborough House, I should not have been at all alarmed—but Whitechapel!

Obeying a sudden impulse and an instinct superior to reason, I followed the cab. But Mondego could not have told the driver he was in a hurry, for the hansom bowled along rapidly. I was quite breathless by the time I met another disengaged hansom.

My brain was whirling like the wheels of my vehicle as we pursued the flying tenor at a discreet distance. Whitechapel was alive and gay, and the pavements were crowded with an animated populace and picturesque with costermongers' illuminations, twinkling and fluttering like gigantic fireflies in the balmy air. A cheerful hubbub of voices floated towards the starry heavens, and cheap-jacks kept the bawl going merrily. I had never been in Whitechapel before, except under the cover of Besant's novels. I wondered if this was the dark city of joyless savages he had discovered, and determined to be my own Stanley in future—your professional explorer always discovers some one to rescue. And with the thought of Besant came another thought that set my lower lip between my teeth. The People's Palace! Yes, that was it! Mondego had been persuaded by a countess or a duchess to sing at the People's Palace! He was on his way now. He was a philanthropist and I was a fool.

Composing myself, I pushed up the trap-door with my umbrella and made inquiries of the driver. He informed me we had not yet reached the People's Palace, but that we should strike it (metaphorically speaking) in about six minutes. The six minutes crawled like hours.

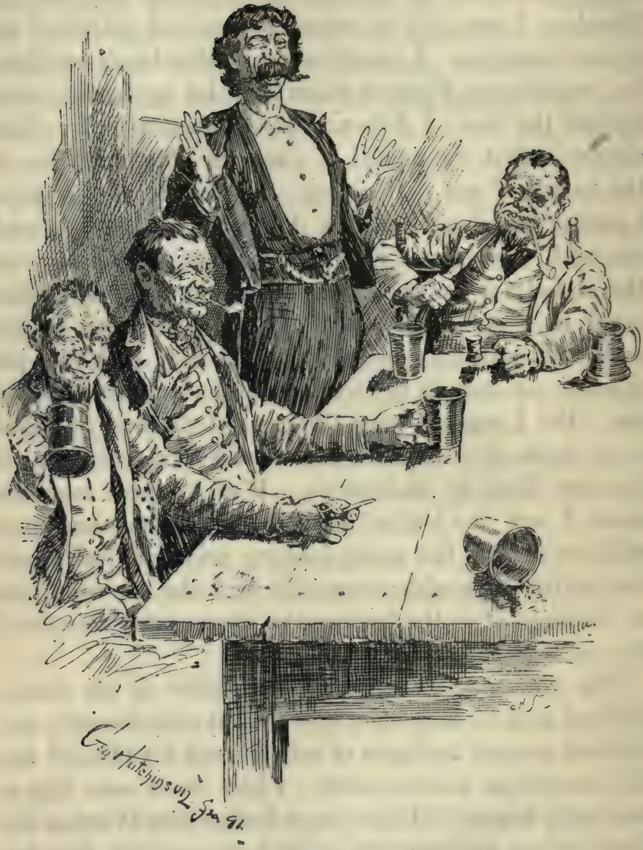
We reached the popular palatial building at last, but our quarry gave no signs of slowing. When we were hopelessly past it I gave a great sigh of relief and lit a cigarette. Two minutes after, the leading hansom diverged to the left, and we went rattling down a dark stony street, which looked rather more like Besant's streets, though quite as like to numerous by-ways in Bayswater. After several intricate windings, I was suddenly jerked forwards by the stoppage of my cab. Mondego had alighted before a patch of brightness fifty yards ahead and was paying his cabman. My heart thumped. I jumped out quickly, threw the driver half a sovereign, and without pausing to answer his inquiries as to what I called the coin, ran towards Israfel, fearing to lose sight of him for a moment. As I approached the patch of light, I was exposed to a cross-fire of strange sounds. From the rear came the quaint curses of the cabman, but they were almost drowned by the roar which burst upon me from in front. A number of masculine voices were intoning, some an octave higher than the rest, some an octave lower, the following mysterious chant—

Dontcher do it, old feller, dontcher do it,
Dontcher do it, old feller, dontcher do it,
Just you bash 'is bloomin' 'at,
And then arx 'im who 's the flat,
For 'e ain't a-goin' to do you,
No 'e ain't,
No 'e ain't,
For e ain't a-goin' to do you,
No 'e ain't.

The last phrase was given with a demoniac yell of conscious supremacy, and culminated in a frenzied burst of hand-clapping, ululation, and foot-stamping.

My alarm for Israfel was now at fever heat. As I saw him disappear within the public-house whence these rowdy sounds proceeded, I sped forwards so quickly that I reached the bar-door ere it had ceased vibrating. I pushed my way through the crowd of frowsy revellers of both sexes, rejoicing that unlike Mondego I was not in evening dress and attracted no special attention. I caught sight of Mondego's swallow-tail mounting a flight of stairs that led up from a room behind the bar. I followed him unhesitatingly. The choruses that descended to meet us convinced me of the nature of our destination. At the top of the stairs a janitor met Israfel with a deferential salutation, and me with a request for twopence. Israfel's entry was the signal for an uproarious burst of cheering, under cover of which I slipped into one of the few empty seats and called for a clay to smoke and a pewter-pot to bury my face in if Israfel should chance to look at me. But I was not very timorous of discovery. I had great faith in my beard, and would have sworn by it like any Turk by Mahomet's. With extreme astonishment I saw the idol of St James's Hall shake hands with several of the seedy-looking men who sat round the central long table, especially with the one-eyed man at the head of it, the hammer in whose hand completed his resemblance to a Cyclops.

The chairman's right-hand man gave up his distinguished seat to Mondego, who took it complacently and ordered several tankards of refreshment for himself and his immediate environment. I had never seen him so radiantly happy. He no longer looked like Werther and Lord Byron and the Cid rolled into one; his face had the beatitudes of Tartarin, Jack ashore, and the brothers Cheeryble. He looked every inch the king of this free-and-easy realm, festive with vulgar mirth, foggy with the vapours of rank tobacco, strident with the roar



FORTY WINKS.

of undisciplined melody, and repellent with the glare of coloured sporting prints and the dinginess of discoloured walls.

The song with the refrain, " Don't you do it," was soon finished, several curious contingencies being described in it, in which refusal to fall in with your interlocutor's demand was tumultuously advised, supplemented by a recommendation to destroy his head-gear. Then the Cyclops rose, and stated in slightly ungrammatical language how pleased they were to see their old pal 'Arry Slapup among them once more. He trusted Mr. Slapup would not go without giving the company "Forty Winks." This did not seem to mean that he was to send them to sleep; for Mondego jumped up beaming, and declared that he would do it at once. When the table had ceased to rattle homage, he started—

Did you ever observe the diversified ways
In which ocular winks may be wunk,
From the wink that's a lightning-like flash in your gaze,
To your long-drawn-out wink when you're drunk?

There's the wink of the hawk to his partner at whist,
There's the lawyer's when clients are gone;
The temperance lecturer's adds to the list,
And philanthropy carries it on!

There's the wink of the journalist writing a par,
And the wink of the reverend skunk,
But the wink of the girl at the Frivoli bar
Is the winkedest wink ever wunk.

CHORUS.

Forty winks! Forty winks!
Hear me link them, see me blink them!
Rorty winks! Rorty winks!
Winks at drinking, winks at clinking;

Naughty winks, naughty winks,
Winks when rinking, rhino chinking,
Winks for prinking, winks at slinking ;
Who would think it, you could wink it
Forty ways, forty winks?

It was an aspect of the question to which I had hitherto devoted no attention, but which was borne in upon me now with convincing comicality. Never have I heard a comic song lending itself so continuously to mimetic and gesticulatory illustration, or so transfigured by it; never have I seen a comic singer turn his eye to better account. That the species of winks numbered two-score, Mondego proved to me by ocular demonstration. No buffoonery withal, but *vis comica* of a high order. Every phase of nictitation was reproduced with astonishing realism, while the body and the rest of the face were subtly and instantaneously transformed and charged with amazingly clever suggestions of character. The prating politician, the demagogue, the mock prude, the gay coquette, the swindling attorney, the cringing sycophant, the swaggering swag-bellied company promoter, the canting cleric, the rollicking tippler, the amorous dotard, the fuddled masher—all these figures of the eternal human comedy, comprehensible equally to the lettered and the unlettered, were hit off with daring strokes as by some French caricaturist. My umbrella was enthusiastic in his praise, and the king of the company had to rise again and again to give encore verses, expanding in affability each time he sat down. At last his *mauvais sujets* let him be; and, after joining jovially in the choruses of "She 's a downy Donna," and "What a bloomin' whopper," he sauntered out, dispensing nods and becks and wreathed smiles to his riotous lieges. I followed so close on his heels that I all but galled his kibe. He walked on, looking for a cab. He stopped to purchase some roasted chestnuts, the last of the season, and as he haggled with the vendor I determined to accost him. I unbearded myself and bearded him. That night he bought no chestnuts. He took me to his crowded chambers in Piccadilly instead, and there, surrounded by the choicest nick-nacks, waste-paper baskets crammed with signed photographs of pretty women, book-cases full of beautifully-worked slippers and nightcaps, card-racks crammed with coroneted invitations, abysmal arm-chairs heaped with dedicated music, and frail tables creaking under litters of unopened *billets doux* and books of (feminine) devotion, he told me the story of his life and I promised to respect his confidence. I cannot better show my respect than by publishing it—for it well deserves the honour.

"I was born in Whitechapel of rich but honest parents named Davis. My father was a tailor in a large way of business, possessing four shops strewn at intervals along the High Road and sprouting out another branch in distant Tottenham Court Road. I was an only child, and as I was considered handsome even by other boys' mothers, you may imagine how my own idolised me. She said I was as beautiful as any of the dummies in our shop-windows, and she got me up to match, with stylish suits and long curls, and I believe her only regret was that she could not exhibit me behind the plate-glass of our West-end establishment. But if I could not be a show-child in that sense, I was in every other. I was put up to sing and recite at every party, till only my father's sumptuous spreads and excellent cigars reconciled his guests to the nuisance of having to make a fuss of me. The seeds thus scattered fell upon fertile soil, and my first visit to the pantomime completed my enchantment and sealed my future. At the age of six I had determined to be a clown. I communicated my intentions to my father, who laughed and gave me sixpence. In short, he spoilt me completely and blamed me for the sequel. At the age of sixteen I left the 'middle class' school at which I had received a 'sound commercial education,' and was set to keep my father's books. By this time I had achieved great reputation as an amateur comedian, having played the leading part in our annual school theatricals. I was also quick with my pen, and my lampoons on the head-master were inferior to no boy's. But my greatest accomplishment was this: I could sing, as you have seen to-night, a really good comic song. I always had the germs of the art in me, but I had learnt a great deal from surreptitious visits to the numerous concert-rooms in and about Whitechapel and Bow of the type we have just left. I was taken to them by an elder boy, who is now breaking stones in Portland. He was a jolly rollicking chap, was Dabchick, but beastly poor. I had plenty of pocket-money, and so between us we managed to have a good deal of fun. We dared not go to the more pretentious music-halls, of which there were one or two, because my sartorial pater sometimes relaxed from his perpetual 'Measure for Measure' to entertainment of a less classic order, and our meetings would not have been cordial. You may imagine, therefore, that I was not happy in a prosaic tailor's shop. It was the worst misfit my father had ever perpetrated. I spoke to the old man, and pointed out that the human being did not grow to pattern, and that a ready-made environment would not suit me. I said my soul was not comfortable in a slop-work suit, that I wasn't a mere dummy to show off his handiwork. But he would not listen to reason, so one fine morning he was left childless, to solace himself as best he might with his wax models, and to extract consolation in his old age from this style fourteen-and-six. But I kept in touch with my mother, whose secret missives came to me blistered with tears and swollen with postal orders. My adventures were variegated. I toured the provinces with "Kingsley's Celebrated Comedy Company," which nobody had ever heard of, and which placarded the provinces with notices from the great London newspapers, which any one was at liberty to look for in the files. I took the name of Harry Slapup, which, to my puerile imagination, seemed a fine dashing name for a low comedian. It was the name under which I had sung comic songs at the Crown Concert Hall. There were many aspirants at the Crown; it was a half-way house to professional music-hall singing. It was good practice, and tradition told of two famous comic singers who had matriculated at the Crown. Several lesser lights had undoubtedly first found a hearing in that smoky alcoholic room. Well, under the name of Harry Slapup I saw a good deal of life behind the scenes, and found it was not all beer and skittles, though there was much more of the former than the latter. Happily, I was blessed with a strong sense of humour and a love of change, which reconciled me to the awful smells, the precipitous ladders, the death-trapdoors, and the piggish dressing-dens (when we hadn't to dress in draughty passages) and to the fact that the ghost did not always walk, even when we played Hamlet. But for my mother's letters I should often have lacked decent food and shelter. I did not stay long with the Comedy Company, which burst up suddenly, as though it were a city company. It seemed a hard life at the time, playing three or four parts a week (though I was always a quick study), but I regretted it when I joined a company which took a comic opera on tour, and I had to play the same part every night all over Great Britain. It was awfully dull all day with no rehearsals to take up the time, and in some of the sleepy stupid boroughs of merry England on rainy winter days I should have died of ennui, if I had not suddenly remembered my literary gifts and covered reams of foolscap with burlesques and comic songs. I even wrote the music to my words, for I could always evolve an air with tolerable facility, though I had no idea of orchestration. I shall never forget my pride when I was allowed to introduce into a comic opera a humorous song written and composed by myself, the conductor of the orchestra undertaking to vamp up an accompaniment; and my pride was only slightly damped by its being a frost. I knew it was not my song that had fallen flat, but the orchestra. Later, I studied the pianoforte with zeal whenever I found one in my lodgings. To cut a long story short, I played for seven years in the provinces, never out of an engagement (for I was able to waive the question of screw), and never in a good one. I have played in everything from Hamlet to Carmen. I sang, and danced, and spouted, and once my childhood's dream was fulfilled, and I said 'Here we are again' for six weeks every night at Chichester. But that was the high-watermark of my success as a comic mummer. All my other parts were as devoid of 'fat' as the kine of Pharaoh's first vision. At the end of seven years Harry Slapup was as obscure a name as it is now. But I still believed I was one of the few men in England who could sing a comic song. I had heard lots of men try to do it and I knew I only wanted my chance to go in and win. Then I got a wire from my mother to come to London. I had seen her once or twice during her annual fortnight at Ramsgate, where my father only came down for the week end, but I had never seen the man who thought his progenitorship gave him the right to trim and clip my life with his shears to the pattern admired in Whitechapel. Of course he had disinherited me. He had had a son and heir, he said, and he was not going to lose one and keep the other. This did not worry me. The original Adam was strong in me. I despised clothes. I abhorred the money that came out of the pockets of trousers, 'warranted to wear.' But this telegram altered matters and repaired the breaches. My father had gone bankrupt. How he had managed it with his safe, steady business puzzled me, as I flew homewards by the night express. I could not credit him with the requisite ingenuity. However I soon learnt the cause. He had tried the fatal experiment of applying the hire system to his business, forgetting that in case of default of payment it was an easier matter to strip people's rooms of furniture than their bodies of raiment. The calamity broke my father's heart; he died penniless, and I lent him the shilling with which to cut me off. I paid his insurance money to our creditors, and thus my mother and I were left alone in the world, with nothing to support us but a comic song that had yet to be sung.

"Well, come what might, I determined to sing it in London. There was neither gold nor glory to be won in the provinces. I had as little chance in London as in the country, so why wander from the centre again? I looked over my MSS., pieced together an entertainment and made up my mind to go in for something high class, and not over-crowded. In short, I resolved to become a society clown. You see the child is father to the man after all."

He smiled a smile of infinite humour, and poked the fire. I opened a bottle of champagne that lay in a cooler and tossed off a glass. I was in a state of nervous excitement, and while Mondego was talking I was all ears, and so could not drink. He went on—

"It was in these extremities that I stumbled on my old friend, Dabchick, the companion of my schoolboy Bohemianism. I met him in York Road, where I had gone to pick up some wrinkles from the artistes who hang round the agents' doors, and to chaffer comic songs, for which I sometimes got a guinea—words and music. Some of the most popular comic songs of the day are from my pen, and I have often been disturbed in the night by hearing my early pot-boilers bellowed from the throats of tipsy revellers. Dabchick was exquisitely dressed and richly jewelled, and told me he was something in a bank. He did not tell me what he was in the bank, though judging from the amount of gold on his person he might have been a drawer in it. He did not cut me even when he found I had no connection whatever with banks. Ah, you will find many virtues in Portland! He told me he belonged to a number of swell clubs, and moved in the highest circles of the four-mile radius; this was rather imaginative, still it was through his influence that I obtained an appearance at a 'ladies' night' of the Rovers' Club. The concert duly took place. The pretty little hall of the Club was crowded with fair women and gallant men. Joachim brought his fiddle, and Antoinette Sterling her organ, and 'Israfel Mondego' was the only unknown name on the daintily-printed programme. The name had been chosen after anxious consultations with Dabchick. Both of us felt that Harry Slapup was not a name to climb to fame on, especially as I had now determined to win it in the higher branches of the comic song. In any case it would never do for the Rovers' Club. I must have a high-class name, which might be an impulse to me and a safeguard against low foolery, which for the rest would never go down at the Rovers' except in a comedian who had shaken hands with the Prince of Wales. The name must also be striking and eccentric, for in spite of Shakespeare there is great virtue in a name. As Solomon says, 'A good name is better than riches'—especially to a 'professional.' The 'Israfel' was my discovery. I chanced on it in Poe's poems. We both agreed it was bizarre enough to make a reputation. 'Mondego' was invented by Dabchick, who also lent me a dress-suit, which made me regret my father, it squeezed me so tight. The item on the programme ran thus (it is burnt on my brain in letters of fire):—

BALLAD . . "A Buried Hope" . *Israfel Mondego*

ISRAFEL MONDEGO.

"The words of this song you know. You have seen it on every drawing-room table, and heard it played from every barrel-organ."

"Yes," I said, "I could repeat it in my sleep." The words forced themselves half-involuntarily from my lips:—

A BURIED HOPE.

Though winter winds are chilling,
The buried blossoms blow,
Though Doubt sweet Love is killing,
The Fates ordain it so.
We parted when the red-breasts
Sang loud mid roses lush,
Yet should our frozen dead-breasts
Refuse to thaw or gush ?

Our Sadness is but Sorrow,
Our Joy is but Delight,
And what will be To-morrow
Can never be To-night.
Our truest Selves with screening
Are hid from friends and foes,
And what on Earth we're meaning
High Heaven only knows.

"Vastly pretty words, indeed," I added slyly. "They would be perfect if they had anything to do with the title."

"Ah, that was my little secret," said Israfel. "You of course grasp that this was intended as a skit on the ordinary drawing-room ballad. The first element of such a ballad is the complete divorce between the title and verses. But if the title had no meaning for the audience, there was no harm in its having a meaning for me. The 'Buried Hope' was my hidden trust that the reputation of a society clown lay enshrined in that song. Alas! it was a hope I soon had to bury in a graver sense."

He paused, overcome with emotion.

"And yet, looking back on it, after all these years, I can honestly say it deserved a better fate. It was an excellent burlesque of the namby-pamby songs of the day, and the last quatrain with its double meaning is extremely clever. The music I wrote myself. I wrote it in the minor, and I surcharged it with subtle sarcasm. It was full of inarticulate longing, and sadness, and weariness, yet it whispered of some ineffable consolation in the far-away whatness of the unintelligible. I played my own accompaniment, which was limited to a few melancholy chords. As I came from behind the screen that hid the artistes' room from the audience my breath came thick and fast. Stage-fright held me in its throes, as though I were a beginner. So much to me and my poor mother depended on that night—my poor mother who had not even an evening dress to be present in. I gave a last touch to my white tie and my black hair, and stepped into the full blaze of two hundred pairs of polite eyes. There was a little perfunctory clapping, succeeded by a sudden rustling of ladies' dresses. A dazzling sea of white shirts and bosoms swam before me; I sank down on the music-stool with gratitude that I had to sit. I had intended to preface my song with the remark, 'Ladies and Gentlemen,—I beg to introduce to your notice a model specimen of the English drawing-room ballad.' I intended to accompany this with a look of dry humour, a sort of refined wink. But my fingers nervously started the prelude before I sat down, and I felt my courage oozing out of their ends. I felt that I could not make that little speech now, much less wink; besides, would it not be an insult to the intelligence of the audience? There was no going back; the weird, pathetic prelude was at an end and I dashed right away into the song—

Though winter winds are chilling—

"It happened to be a seething night of early summer, but the inaccuracy of a vocal assertion is no bar to its impressiveness. I put a good deal of shiver and heartbreak into that line, to contrast with the hopefulness of the next. It was a most artistic skit, but when I reached the end of the first verse there was a dead silence. Not a single snigger. My heart sank within me. My eyes had been turned up in passionate agony. I now rolled them cautiously towards the audience in search of a smile. No; every face was blank and stony. There were tears of disappointment in my voice as I sang the second stanza, with its consoling hints of a far-away whatness. The silence throughout was painful. My voice was choking with disappointment as I sang of human effort and aspiration misinterpreted, misunderstood—

And what on Earth we're meaning
High Heaven only knows.

"As the last notes trembled into silence I rose and dashed from the platform. To my amazement a thunderous roar pursued me. The hall seemed to rock with applause. I could hardly believe my ears. Could I have made a hit after all? And was seriousness merely the fashionable method of expressing amusement? Somebody pushed me back on the platform; I bowed as if in a dream, and turned back dazed. But the enthusiasm continued. '*Bravo*, *Bravissima*, *Bis*, *Encore*,' resounded in a chorus from all sides, sweet female voices taking up the treble. My heart was too full to speak. So I sang. I sang the last verse again, making it more maudlin than ever by my tears of joy. Then, still pursued by that tempest of enthusiasm, I tottered out of the artistes' room into a passage in search of air. In an instant Dabchick was by my side, wringing my hand in violent congratulation. As he pumped away, the tears continued to fall from my eyes.

"'I say, dear boy, you've knocked 'em,' he said; 'you'll have half-a-dozen offers to-morrow. But I thought you were going to do something comic.'

"I stared at him.

"'Don't be funny, old man,' I said. 'I'm awfully indebted to you, so don't spoil it. But I was afraid it was going to be a frost. They don't laugh up West, do they?'

"'Oh, don't they? You try them.'

"'But I *have* tried them. You don't mean to say you didn't know that was a refined comic song.'

"'A comic song?' he repeated, staring at me as if suspecting I was chaffing him—'a comic song? Are you serious?'

"'Never was more serious in my life!'

"'That's what they all thought you were just now. Bai Jove! this is rich.' And he started laughing convulsively till his cheeks were as wet as mine. I stood there, waiting in much annoyance till his foolish mirth should have spent itself.

"'Oh but, dear boy,' he said at last, 'your reputation's made as a sweet, sad tenor! I never knew such a *furore*. Everybody was snivelling into his or her handkerchief; the ladies are all in love with you, and vowing that your singing is just too sweet and lovely for anything, and too awfully exquisite; and you're charming and handsome and a darling! and they are raving about your eyebrows and your moustache! They were all asking who you were; and I heard Lady Desborough inquiring for your address from the secretary, and saying you must sing at her next "At Home." Your fortune is made, old man. You have stumbled into success. Stick to it. Oh, you dare not sing comic songs now. It would spoil everything.'

"My heart sank. 'Dare not sing comic songs?' I faltered.

"'No,' he answered emphatically; 'think of your poor old mother. You have found out where your real forte lies. Stick to it! It's a deuced job to make a hit in London, I can tell you. It's a terrible uphill battle in the throng of geniuses and charlatans. Don't you risk anything else. You'll only spoil your market. The public won't stand versatility. Sentimentality is your line; sentimental you must remain till the end of the chapter. Nobody knows you were Harry Slapup. Harry Slapup, the comic singer, is dead and Israfel Mondego, the drawing-room onion and passion-flower, reigns in his stead.'

"I did not give in without a struggle; but in the end I saw that Dabchick was wise. My mother's misery was a daily reproachful argument. I buried the hope of winning the laurels of comic singing, and I went forth into the battle of life cloaked in a mantle of hypocrisy. What my career has been I need not recapitulate. I have deluged a Puritan people with an ocean of false sentiment. It is largely through me that they have preferred moonshine to healthy sunlight. Young persons, who could not read Martin Tupper without a blush rising to their cheeks, gloried in my voluptuous effusions. My waltzes were a caress and my verses a kiss. Detestable old dowagers, who had sold their daughters to wealthy husbands, and who in real life were as matter-of-fact as pillar-boxes, crowded to my concerts, languishing in the ardours of my poetry and revelling in the æsthetic raptures of my music."

"And your moustache!"

He smiled good-humouredly. "I won't deny it," he said.

"But how did you manage to write the music?"

"Didn't I tell you I had a lot of comic songs in stock from my old touring days? I took these tunes, transposed them into the minor, and slowed them down."

"And the orchestration?"

"Oh, there are so many starving musicians in London, who have taken degrees and all that. They will write you an accompaniment for a mere song—no pun intended. The words needed even less alteration. Later on, in the full tide of my success, I was pressed to accept an appointment at a musical college, and, in the hopes of learning something from my pupils, I took it. I picked up a good many hints from their singing, studied the harmony text-books *pari passu* with them, and completed my education by allowing them to orchestrate my compositions."

"Well, you 've had the devil's own luck."

"In truth, the devil's," he repeated gloomily. "When the excitement of the first struggle was over, none could feel that more acutely than I. Paul, up to my London *début*, my conscience was pure. I joyed in my work, and the thorns on the road to honest success only gave me the rapture of the fight. Now I felt my whole life was a sham and a disgrace."

"No, no!" I said, "you earned your money honestly."

"I did not," he said. "My life was a lie; I, who was brimming over with humour, had to wear the cramping folds of Romanticism. I wanted to sing 'Forty Winks'; my existence has been one long wink. Everything was sacrificed to my reputation."

"But suppose somebody had identified you as Harry Slapup?"

"Unfortunately that was impossible. How should those who knew the grub recognise the caterpillar?"

"Then your secret was safe?"

"Alas! yes. My mother knew of my comic aspirations, but the world at large took me quite seriously."

"What about Dabchick?"

"He was not at large. The only man in the world who knew my unhappy secret was confined in Portland for bank defalcations. Imagine then how choked and stifled my true self has been."

"I do not wonder you dropped into the Crown occasionally," I said.

"Thank you, thank you, Paul," he said, the tears coming into his eyes. "But for that I should have gone mad. It was the only vent. There I threw off the painful mask and revelled in my real self. They thought I had an engagement at some London music-hall, and were very proud of me. Often I have gone thither straight from a marchioness's reception and found relief and recreation."

"But there was consolation in this unreal life—the feminine devotion you have attracted"——

"D—n it, Paul," he said brutally, "surely *you* are not going to throw that up at me, too? Why do you think I joined the Bachelors' Club last year, if it was not that I was driven into misogyny by this same feminine devotion, by this undisguised admiration of silly young girls and sillier old women, by the shoals of scented notes, the wagon-loads of presents, the marriage proposals, and the dinner and elopement invitations received by the gross?"

"Forgive me," I said gently, "I thought you liked it."

"Liked it? Why, don't you know that I was so fond of singing at your concerts, only because it was one of the few occasions I could be sure of an audience of men? Can you not feel how wretched it was for me to stand up under the ogling gaze of five hundred women, varied at wide intervals by a solitary man or small boy? Oh the horror of it for a modest man!" He buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, but you had the satisfaction of supporting your aged mother in luxury."

"It was my sole consolation. And that brings me to the crux of the matter. I had gone on appeasing my conscience with this sop for years, when suddenly, six months ago, the excuse was taken from me. My poor old mother——" his voice broke, and he wiped away a tear.

"Died?"

"No, married. I kept her in such luxury that a young gentleman, of moderate means, mistook her for a rich widow and eloped with her. I have forgiven her; I hope he has. Anyway she is provided for. The pangs of conscience now became intolerable. Better, I thought, an honest crust than a dishonest cream-tart. What was to be done? To become a comic singer was out of the question. I had gone too far for that. I could not undo the past. The only course left to me was to press on to the higher branches of serious music. I could make the transition gradually and imperceptibly, leaving behind my sentimentality as the nautilus moves from its early chambers. I could rise on stepping-stones of my dead self to higher things! By this time, what with teaching, what with composing and criticising, I had picked up a very fair knowledge of music. I could now harmonise my own airs. I took private lessons from a famous singing-master, and left no stone unturned to cultivate art earnestly and with dignity. One day I introduced some classical items from the great masters into my afternoon programme and I wrote a little cantata. The change had been well advertised; but, to my disgust, the audience remained unchanged,—an oasis of man in a desert of woman. Everywhere frocks, frocks, frocks, fans, lorgnettes, hand-glasses, scented handkerchiefs. Pah! it made me sick. My classical items were coldly received. My journalistic friends were eulogistic enough in the papers they were openly connected with. But how they took it out of me in those for which they wrote in secret. I, with my airs and graces, my lyrics and my female acolytes, had long been the butt of the comic papers, but my efforts to amend only brought down severer satire on my defenceless head! And how these epigrams stung! The chief sting lay in the fact that I could have written them myself. I knew, too, how they sneered at me in the Clubs behind my back, and how men said I made them ill, and expressed an amiable desire to kick me.

Paul, if I have seemed to wax fat by charlatanism, Heaven has not let me go unpunished. If I had earned a fortune, I had earned also the contempt of every honest heart, including my own."

"Don't talk so," I cried; "I, at least, do not despise you."

"You do, you do; you must. This must end. I cannot drag on this life of insincerity. I have read Ibsen, and I know honesty is the only policy. There is only one way to free my life from these clogs and shackles, these sneers and sarcasms—there is only one path to the higher life of art."

"And that is?"

"Marriage."

Another! I closed my eyes. A faintness overcame me. Israfel's voice sounded far away.

"The thought only came to me last Saturday. A casual newspaper sarcasm has illumined my life. This week's *Hornet* says:—'Mr. Mondego is the most single-minded devotee of art in the country. And to this single-mindedness he owes all his success. The lesson should be encouraging to musical aspirants.' What a flood of light this threw on my past! How blind I had been! That was it, that was the stumbling-block in the path of my progress! *I dared not marry,*—that was what the world was thinking. I had no artistic dignity; I had not even conceit enough to rely on the attractions of my music. My whole popularity depended on my remaining single, so as to keep alive the hopes of all my female admirers! Well, they should see. These thoughts have been agitating me for days. My reception at to-night's concert clinched my resolution. Even my fellow Bachelors refused to take me seriously. Why should I trouble about my allegiance to their principles or let this stand in the way of the higher life?"

"And you have resolved finally——?" I breathed.

"Finally. Marriage will strike the key-note of my future, of my independence, of my artistic seriousness. It will show I am not a mere caterer for amorous admirers; that I supply music, not flirtation. Marriage will be the transition to the truer life; it alone can resolve the discord in my existence."

"Or prepare it," I murmured. "And don't you remember the definition of marriage as the common chord of two flats?"

"Japes cannot move me now," he replied. "I must lay this libellous imputation on my artistic life. Marriage is the only remedy. After the honeymoon I shall sing no more love-songs."

"That is extremely probable," I muttered.

"I shall write and sing only classical music; music to live, not music to live by."

"And what if you fail?"

"Then at least I fail in a good cause. I do not think I shall fail, once I have cut myself adrift from the network of petticoats; but if the worst come to the worst, I will emigrate to the Antipodes and under a new name try to live a new and honest life as a comic singer in a new land. As a Clown I can always get a living, and the performance of manhood may yet crown the expectation of infancy."

"And whom will you marry?"

"I have thought of that, too. I shall marry the woman who, of all women in the world, has the least soul for music and the worst ear."

"Why?"

"So that if I fail in my artistic aspirations, or if it is true that I am only accepted because I am a Bachelor, she may not regret it. Besides, one does not care to rehearse one's songs before a trained ear. It must be so painful to it. Then you might both want to occupy the piano at the same time, and the ensuing duet might not be harmonious. The woman who cannot tell 'God Save the Queen' from Schubert's 'Serenade,' except by seeing the people putting on their wraps and overcoats, is the musician's fittest mate. If I have to turn to comic singing, she will not think it a fall. Your superior person is so unsuperior to prejudices, and cannot see that in the Kingdom of Art are many mansions, each as perfect in its way as the rest."

"And have you such a person in your eye?"

"I have."

"I am sorry."

"Ah, perhaps some day there will be a beam in your own eye."

"Never; but who is the mote in yours?"

"One of my pupils; she is not beautiful, but she is absolutely a clod in music. Unfortunately for herself, her people are rich and have as little ear as herself. So they think she is going to be a great singer, and don't grudge the expense. She has been with me for fifteen terms, and if she knows a B from a bull's foot or an F sharp, it is the extent of her musical acquirements. She cannot sing a phrase of three notes without flattening or sharpening. Other girls equally devoid of ear might develop one later, but hers is tried and untrue."

"But suppose she refuses you?"

"Impossible. If she did not admire me she would not have the worst ear for music in the world."

"You are too hard on yourself. Well, good-night. I know the worst. Thanks for your confidence. Poor M'Gullicuddy! I have a hard task before me."

"I have confidence in your tact. And you will be secret?"

"As the cremation urn."

"Well, good-night. Another glass of champagne?"

"Thank you. Here 's prosperity to the Society Clown. Good-night."

"Good-night."

* * * * *

The Bachelors had hardly recovered from the customary period of mourning when they learnt that Israfel had sailed for the Antipodes—alone. A week after the following paragraph appeared in *The Carrion Crow*:—

> "Mr. Israfel Mondego, the popular tenor, whose marriage a fortnight ago excited so much heartburning, and who has probably dealt a severe blow to his reputation by his invidious choice, has left England on an Irish honeymoon—by himself. It is whispered that the lady who has led him to the altar was so romantically in love with him that she attended his lessons for fifteen terms—always marking time (not in a musical sense) rather than progress to the point at which she would have had no excuse for retaining the services of her fascinating music-master. Mrs. Israfel Mondego's first musical *matinée* at St. James's Hall next Thursday week should attract a large audience, for in addition to the natural interest centring in her, it is understood that she is a most accomplished pianist and vocalist. It is rumoured that Mr. Mondego intends trying the experiment of a series of vocal recitals, of an unaccustomed kind, in Sydney and Melbourne, and that he will as usual accompany himself, his wife having apparently refused to do so. . . . "

I do not understand how this last bit got into print. It is true I mentioned it in confidence when I was writing to my friend, the Editor, but I had no idea he would dare to print it. And why he should insult me by sending me a cheque for a guinea I do not understand. Still, one has to pocket so many insults in this world.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOGIC OF LOVE.

JUNE found the Club still suffering from the defection of Israfel. There was no member whose loss could have grieved us so much. In him the Club lost at once a butt and a buttress. Take him for all in all, we felt we should not look upon his like again.

Joseph Fogson, M.D., B.Sc., had drowned his grief in medicine. He went practising in Bethnal Green, just to oblige an old and overworked hospital chum who was knocked up — too frequently in the dead of night. Joseph Fogson had no need to practise on helpless invalids for a living, for he had a private fortune. It was left to him unexpectedly, after he had spent the best years of his youth in poring over miserable books and cutting up wretched dry-as-dust corpses. He was a terrible toiler, and brilliant to boot, and had won all sorts of medals and scholarships, and had none of the virtues of the medical charlatan, and never dreamed of anything but a lifetime of mitigated poverty. So when the solicitor told him he was worth two thousand a year he was dreadfully annoyed. Remorse for his squandered youth set in severely. He wasted months in regretting the time he had wasted. Verily, a young man may sow his wild oats, but conscience will not digest the harvest without aches and agonies manifold. His repentance came too late to avail him; his youthful excesses of work had impoverished his system. The exuberance necessary to enjoyment was for ever vanished. It was a terrible sermon on the vanity of labour.

It was no less forcible a homily on the slavery of habit. Our old vices cannot be cast off like our old clothes and exchanged for new. We have inoculated ourselves with them, and they cannot be expelled from the blood. Thus it was that when Joseph Fogson, M.D., B.Sc., went to Bethnal Green as a substitute for his chum he worked shockingly hard, and did a frightful amount of good to the sickly residents of the dreary district.

And all for nothing, too; which hardly seemed fair. It was all very well for him to look after *my* health without fee, but what claim had these Bethnal Greenlanders upon him? I was glad to meet him in the Strand at last, and to divine from his presence there that his thankless task was over.

I held out my hand to him warmly, for it was almost a fortnight since I had seen him.

"How am I?" I said heartily.

He grasped my hand cordially, and placed his finger upon my wrist.

"You are seedy, old man," he said instantly. "You are queer."

I was so alarmed and surprised that my umbrella fell from my other hand, and my head began to ache. Evidently I had felt the loss of Israfel more deeply than I had imagined. Joseph rescued my umbrella from under the feet of a careless chorus girl, who was trampling on it with the haughtiness of a prima donna. Then he said—

"And how am *I*, Paul?"

"Not quite well, thank you," I said, for his face told a sad tale of late hours and late patients. It was a fine handsome sympathetic face at its best, with a noble forehead, a neat moustache, and dreamy blue-grey eyes.

"You are right," he said wearily. "I feel quite washed out. Strange how a week's work floors me. I shall never make old bones, though I may lecture on them."

His demeanour made me anxious. "And what do you advise me to take?" I inquired nervously.

"A holiday," he replied. "Go for a walking-tour."

"Oh, but it's only June," I said. "Only clerks leave town in June."

"You can't put off your seedy-time till a more fashionable month, can you?"

"No," I replied sadly. "It's a great nuisance, because I'm very fond of walking-tours. But if I go, will you come with me?"

He refused point-blank, but I persuaded him at last.

"We'll start to-day," he said resignedly. "June is a lovely month for walking-tours—the sun's not so scorching as later."

"Oh, but I 'm not ready to start," I said.

"Nonsense. You just pack a satchel or knapsack with a few necessaries. This sort of thing, you know." He half drew out a cloth-bag from his coat-tail pocket, then shoved it back.

"You impostor!" I said. "You have trapped me. You were looking out for a companion for your own walking-tour."

He smiled frankly.

"I won't go with you," I said laughingly. "I don't see why I should go as companion to a gentleman for nothing."

"Oh, if that 's all, I 'll pay the exes."

I refused point-blank, but he persuaded me at last. After all it was a shame to see his money giving enjoyment to no one; and if I were with him, I might brighten him up a bit.

"But I prefer a walking-tour by bicycle," I urged. "Walking-tours on foot are so slow. You get over so little country."

"But I can't ride a bicycle," answered Joseph Fogson, M.D., B.Sc.

I could not either. That was why I wanted to, and said so with truth.

I grumbled so at having to make this fresh concession to Fogson's convenience, that by the time we started it was understood that I was placing him under a heavy obligation in allowing him to be responsible for my expenses. We made a bee-line, more or less, for Portsmouth, and, interrupting our walk, we sailed from Southsea across the crisping channel to the "Garden of England." We landed safely upon the right tight little island, secured at every point by a merciless battery of pier-tolls against all danger of invasion by vagrom Ishmaels. The weather was glorious, the sky glittered like a sapphire, the sea sparkled like champagne, and I felt as if I had swallowed some. Even Fogson was slightly inebriated by the glow and freshness of an unreal English summer. As we struck across the flowering odorous isle, inhaling the ozone and watching the many beautifully-painted butterflies fluttering among the poppies, Fogson grew quite jolly and told me the names of everything in Latin. I paid no attention to him, but I remember not one of those butterflies had a plain double-jointed Christian name. Each had been christened as complexly as if it were a peer of the realm.

We did not follow the usual tourist's route, but explored the interior, which is a maze of loveliness, abounding in tempting perspectives. Every leafy avenue is rich in promise; such nestling farmhouses, such peeping spires, such quaint red-tiled cottages, such picturesque old-fashioned mullioned windows, such delicious wafts of perfume from the gardens and orchards, such bits of beautiful Old England, as are perhaps nowhere else so profusely scattered!

Suddenly Fogson heaved a sigh of content.

"What does this remind you of, Paul?" he said.

"Of Mandeville Brown," I answered immediately.

"Of Mandeville Brown?" he echoed incredulously.

"Yes," I said. "I keep thinking what a fool he is to say life is not worth living. I wish he was here."

"I don't," Fogson burst forth. "He would blight the deep peace of nature. He would be like the serpent in Paradise, bringing to it the knowledge of good and evil. Ah, what a fine old allegory was that! Oh this disease of thought! Thought about things was the primitive curse; but thought about thought is the modern malison."

I was surprised to find this vein of sentiment in the man of science. But you can learn more of a man by living with him two days than by two years of superficial association spread over ten.

"But I did not use the word 'remind' in your sense," he went on, more calmly. "What this scene with its rustic beauty, its idyllic sweetness, its healthy freshness, reminds me of is the very antithesis of Mandeville Brown."

"Yes?" I said encouragingly, for I do not like to see a man hesitate on the edge of a revelation. "It reminds you of——"

"No matter, you don't know her."

Her? I grew pale. "Doesn't matter?" I said. "I should like to. It reminds you of——"

"It reminds me," he said, and his eyes filled with soft dreamy light,—"it reminds me of Barbara."

A swarm of gorgeous butterflies seemed whirling before my eyes but I walked on, keeping time with the sentimental Doctor of Medicine. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot—so we plod on in our dull mechanic tasks, though the universe lies exanimate at our feet.

"And who is Barbara?" I said at length.

"Barbara is——" and again his eyes wore the rapt ecstatic look of an anchorite beholding a heavenly vision, of a poet bodying forth the shapes of things unknown. "Barbara is—the incarnation of all that is most fair and pure and exquisite in sweet English girlhood. She is the warmth of the heart and the light of the eyes. Her instincts are pure as the white rose she wears at her bosom. She is healthy without coarseness and chaste without consciousness or prudery, and she looks at you candidly with limpid blue eyes. She is joyous and debonair as a May morning. She dresses in spotless white with a simple hat of straw. She speaks no language but her mother-tongue, but oh how the sweet Saxon words ripple from between her pearly teeth in a flowing music of syllables. And when she sings some simple air, the soul of this fair motherland of ours seems to have entered into the song, and it breathes of new-mown hay, and harvest wains, and russet orchards, and snowy hawthorn, and calm lowing kine, and the white moon, and bowls of bubbly milk, rich and creamy, and the soft restfulness of nature, and the gentle ordered life of rustic generations, and the sweet sanctities of old household ways, and old-fashioned fireplaces ruddy with rough crackling logs, and wainscoted chambers, and huge smoking platters, and diamond panes, and jasmine and eglantine——"

He paused suddenly. He had forgotten himself. He remembered me. He stole a sidelong embarrassed look at me.

"So that is Barbara," I said, mastering my emotion and the thought of M'Gullicuddy.

"Yes, that is Barbara."

"Where does she live?"

"On a farm in the heart of rural England," he answered readily. "She has never been to London. She does not play the piano. She has not been philistinised by a 'refined education.' She cuts bread and makes butter with her own white hands. She milks the cows in the morning."

"A dairymaid," I said.

"No, no. She is the farmer's daughter."

"Is she tall or short?"

"Medium. Her figure is lissom; the curves tremble upon womanhood. She moves as gracefully as a fawn, and her heart is as tender as it is true. She is a girl who will love once and deeply and for ever."

"How long have you known her?"

"Let me see—it was in my first year at the hospital. It must be—let me see, yes—it must be quite ten years now. Ten wasted years," he repeated and his eyes filled with tears and his mobile mouth trembled. "Ten years since then. Ah, how the time flies—and life passes away unemployed, unenjoyed."

"But surely *you* ought not to complain. You are young yet and wealthy and have only to ask to have."

"My dear Paul," he said, smiling sadly and laying a gentle, trembling hand on my shoulder, "I am too much a spectator of life to seize the happiness that lies to my hand. But don't let us speak of this subject any more. It recalls too many bitter memories."

I made no demur; for a week he was mine as the wedding guest was the Ancient Mariner's. There was no hurry to extort the whole truth. He would return to Barbara of himself soon enough.

My insight was justified. He returned to her that very night.

We were located in a curious double-bedded room in a little inland inn. The Doctor of Medicine stood at the narrow casement, looking over the lovely moonlit landscape. The rich meadows stretched away peacefully and the air was drowsy with sweet country scents. The Doctor took his pipe from his mouth and pointed vaguely towards the horizon.

"Yonder," he said, half to me, half in reverie,—"yonder lives Barbara."

So this was why he had come to the Isle of Wight. Poor M'Gullicuddy!

"We shall probably be seeing her to-morrow, then?" I said, with affected cheerfulness.

He shook his head. "I am afraid not," he said, turning towards me a full honest face, shadowed by a melancholy smile. He sighed, moved away from the casement, slid it half back, and commenced undressing. I followed suit and in another few minutes we were in our beds, with candles extinguished and the moonlight streaming upon the floor. Only one of us slept. It was Joseph Fogson, M.D., B.Sc. My brain was too busy to rest. In vain I tried to think of nothing. It went clicking away like a tape-machine, turning out thoughts as the machine turns out inches of news. There was a little wind in the trees about midnight and the hour was chimed from some neighbouring steeple at apparently uneven intervals. These were the only sounds that came to vary the monotony of my thoughts till about a quarter past one, when I heard a strange sound of muttering in the room. My pulse stood still. In another moment I was smiling at myself. The noise came from Fogson's bed. He was talking in his sleep. I strained my ears, but could not catch the words. I slipped noiselessly from between the sheets, and glided in my white night-shirt across the strip of moonlight that lay between our beds. I bent over his lips.

"Barbara!" he murmured. "Barbara!"

This time I felt only pity. My indignation was dead. If Barbara was all he painted her, his sufferings must indeed be poignant. Not to have culled this fresh and fair young flower of English girlhood must needs make life bitter to any one who believed in love,—and to my surprise, Fogson was a recreant to the Club in theory if not in practice. I placed my hand gently upon the big forehead. It was burning. Light as my touch was, it awoke him. He stared at me wildly.

"It 's only me—Paul," I said soothingly.

"Thank Heaven!" he said. "I took you for a ghost and was afraid——"

"Afraid?" I laughed gently. "You, a materialistic doctor afraid?"

"Not of the ghost," he repeated. "I didn't care a jot for that. My fear was that I should have to recast the psychical theories of a lifetime and eat spiritualistic humble-pie. But why are you out of bed?"

"You seemed restless and feverish," I said.

"It is very good of you, Paul," he said gratefully. "Yes, I suppose I was more knocked up than I imagined, and our long walk has overtaxed my strength. I suppose I was talking in my sleep."

"You were," I said, watching him narrowly as I probed him with the lancet. "You were talking about Barbara."

"I do not wonder," he replied without wincing. "Whenever I get among real English scenery like this—ivy-clad churches and granges and cows and the scent of the honeysuckle, my thoughts will go back to her; my brain conjures her up of itself. Great is the Law of Association and it will prevail."

"Well, let it have its way," I said. "Tell me about her again. It will ease your brain. The nervous currents will discharge themselves, then you will sleep quietly."

"Bravo, Paul," said the Doctor. "You have translated the confessional into its physiological equivalents. You deserve to hear my little story. It will entertain you and ease me, as you say. But you are sure you don't want go to sleep?"

"I do. I haven't been able to. Perhaps your tale will make me."

"All right," laughed back the Doctor. "But go back to bed, old fellow, or you'll catch cold, and then ho! for gruel and physic. Ready! Well, here goes. . . . Ten years ago I was a student at Sebastian's Hospital in Glasgow, for I have the honour of being a countryman of our President. I had little money and less expectations. I studied day and night, and eked out my income by winning a few scholarships, which was easy enough, for I had taken unexpectedly to the profession and was considerably older than the average student of my year. I lived quite alone in a cheerless attic, with a skull, a box of bones, and a microscope for sole ornament. The district was shabby and gloomy, but it was near the hospital and cheap. The maid-of-all-work was slatternly and the table-linen was dirty. I spent the day listening to lectures, committing to memory dull catalogues of muscles and chemical formulæ, and dissecting one wizened old woman. Eight of us were at work upon her, like the dwarfs upon Gulliver—some at the arms, some at the head, some at the feet, till she was whittled out of all recognition. I mention these things to show you that everything combined to make existence a grey fog. I was working for the degree of B.Sc., at the same time as for the M.B., so that I babbled of molecules in my dreams, as I did to-night of Barbara. I had no time nor thought but for my books and my specimens. The work was tedious to a degree, much more so to two degrees, though I had determined to master it. The treatises were written in an uncouth jargon, and unenlivened by a gleam of fancy or humour or literature, and I have always been a lover of the human and the living. When I said that my existence was a grey fog I forgot the rifts in it. My sense of humour now and then emitted a feeble radiance, which pierced the leaden vapours that were closing in on my soul. The students were such prigs and fools; the lines of demarcation between first year's and second year's, and third year's were so childishly rigid; the fellows had no sense of fun; Bob Allen and Tom Sawyer had grown staid and decorous; they cared so little for anything but the pecuniary side of the medical career. The lecturers were rather better, and I got a little amusement out of their idiosyncrasies. One used to throw open the door of the lecture-room punctually at 9 A.M., and ere his hand had relinquished its hold of the door-handle, he would be heard saying, 'The œsophagus, gentlemen,' and before he had reached his desk we knew quite a number of the curiosities of the œsophagus. Another would say, 'If you please, gentlemen, the functions of the medulla oblongata are, etc.,' as if we could alter the constitution of the microcosm at our own sweet will. I was often very tempted to say that I was *not* pleased with the sentience of the dental nerves, or that I derived no particular satisfaction from the percentage of white corpuscles in the blood, or that I strongly objected to the position of the pancreas, or to muscles being irritated. But I never succumbed to the temptation. Another old fellow, I remember, had a trick of prefacing every sentence with the phrase, 'As a matter of fact, gentlemen.' I dubbed him the matter-of-fact professor, though, as a matter of fact, he was a very amusing and anecdotal lecturer, and often illumined his discourse by funny stories, which he admitted to be apocryphal, but which he invariably commenced with, 'As a matter of fact, gentlemen.'

"But even these humours soon palled and ceased to amuse me. They were not enough to counterbalance the gloom of all my surroundings. After I had got into the groove of the medical work, I began to take up the Logic and the Psychology which were necessary for the B.Sc. I began with the Psychology, as the more novel and difficult of the two to tackle. I flattered myself I had no lack of Logic. But what Psychology might be I knew not. I had heard vague and awful rumours that it was stiff, though I was not inclined to attach much importance to that. My predecessors from early schoolboyhood had always called everything stiff. To me the adjective was chiefly associated with glasses of grog. I had no use for it in connection with study.

"I started one night at ten, and read on fascinated till daylight. A new world had opened before me, of which I had hitherto known nothing. I read on breathlessly, silent as Cortes upon that peak in Darien. But it was a world of gloom and horror, of Dis and the ebon shades, and I explored it with a curiosity that was morbid. From that day to this I have never had a thoroughly healthy thought. For introspection was born in my soul, and introspection is nothing more nor less than a mental affliction. Introspection is the highest and most intellectual form of lunacy. Physical dissection had made me morbid enough. To see the springs of this vaunted life of ours laid bare, to magnify the grey matter of thought and love two thousand diameters under a microscope, to hack and cut the human form bestial till every nerve was tracked to its route, every fibre and filament forced to reveal its function,—all this had made human life seem to me a poor thing and a brutish. Isolated from all human relations as I was, the world became to me but a vast dissecting-room, where seemingly living beings strutted and fretted it by the reflex action of galvanised muscles. My eye undressed the people I met in the street, and stretched them cold and rigid upon deal boards, and turned up their muscles. They were but cunning collocations of cells, informed by an allotropic modification of electricity, and hastening to dissolution, disintegrating at the merest trifle. But over all was the mystery of the human soul; and now and then in moments of reaction the inadequacy of unconscious atoms to evolve their own analysers was flashed fitfully upon me.

"When I had hearkened to the message of the Psychologists the last vestige of interest in life died away. The last sparkle was taken from the cup of life, leaving a dull, insipid fluid. It was the extreme empirical school into whose hands I had fallen, and they stripped me of all my faculties and left me not a rag wherewith to cover my nakedness. I had lost faith in everything else; they robbed me of my faith in myself, and left me a battered wreck. I didn't mind knowing how my body worked, but I rebelled against my mind being picked to pieces. Nevertheless, in spite of all my inward revolts, I was carried along on a stream of remorseless logic. I lost my Memory, on which I had hitherto prided myself; it was resolved into a bundle of associations, none of which existed till called for, though they were all waiting patiently outside the door of existence, ready to come in when wanted. I thought it was very good of them. Evidently they had been trained in a good school—empirical as it was. I learnt that there was no such thing as Personality (though real estate was unchallenged). I mourned over my lost Personality, till I discovered that I had several Personalities instead. But I was not used to my own society, and I felt rather awkward and shy. I did not like having so many Personalities. I was jealous of their being Me. I wanted a monopoly of myself. I had worked hard to train myself from earliest youth, and I didn't see why these other Personalities should romp in at this advanced hour. Kings and editors might express themselves in the first person plural if they liked, but I wanted the good old first person singular, which I had used from childhood. When I learnt that I *hadn't* used it from childhood, but had spoken of myself familiarly by the name of 'Joey,' I gave in with a groan. I had started with two Personalities, and I must have grown them like teeth. Perhaps I had thirty-two of them. I lost my Self in the crowd.

"By this time I was not sorry to discover that I did not exist. Life was, indeed, hardly worth having on those terms. It saved endless complications with my selves not to exist. It was rather a nuisance, though, to have to continue to live, all the same, for it was only my *I* that was put out. By a mistaken kindness I was reprieved and allowed to exist intermittently by a succession of unrelated pulses of consciousness, which mistook themselves for unity. I was reduced to living from hand-to-mouth, so to speak. Since the publication of Professor Ward's article in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, each student is allowed a transcendental Personality, as well as an empirical Personality—but that was before my time. The new generation is treated a good deal better than the old, and has all sorts of luxuries and facilities that were denied to us. But there, there, I mustn't envy the young people; the world progresses, and I shan't be the man to grudge them the luck of being born later.

"I had no sooner lost my I than, reading some Philosophy, I discovered that it was the all in all—the be-all and the end-all of existence. Without ME (or some of me) nothing could exist. It was only by virtue of their relation to my consciousness that things could have any being. This great universe with its suns and stars and anatomy lectures was dependent upon Me for bare existence. It was a sort of poor relation of my consciousness, which flourished when I shed the light of my countenance upon it and withered away to nothingness when I pitilessly shut my doors in its face. I was indescribably elated at the discovery, and cracked a bottle of Bass that night to celebrate it. I slept a drunken sleep of fourteen hours, and missed my morning lecture. I could not start for the hospital till eleven in the forenoon, and when I did I was considerably surprised to see nothing on the evening bills about 'Destruction of the Universe—full account by our own correspondent.' I felt sure that, with the competition in the newspaper world, they would not have missed such an important event. I had always wished to be alive when the world came to an end as so long predicted by Mother Shipton and other prophets. Not because I desired to be in at the death, but because I had a strong curiosity to see what the newspapers would say the day after, especially to read the indignant letters to the *Times* and the leader in the *Daily Wire*. Anyhow, after this failure of my nihilistic attempt, I came to the conclusion that not the Universe but Philosophy was all my I. As for the assertion that out of our minds nothing could be, I decided that it was manifestly untrue, since the Philosophers were all out of theirs. The joke was that even the books themselves relaxed here, and inserted a flippant passage in the desert of dulness. They asked what was Mind, and they said 'No matter.' They asked what was Matter, and said 'Never mind.' On the other hand, when you inquired further what created Mind they said Matter, and when you asked what created Matter they said Mind—as if Matter and Mind were members of a sort of you-scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours society. Their arguments were always going round in circles, so that the realm of philosophy appeared to me like an intellectual dancing academy. At last I gave up the attempt to eat my own head—which constitutes philosophy—but not before a universal scepticism had settled on my soul. I saw that we are automata, moved by heredity and hypnotism and what not—the playthings of blind forces. The idea of our arriving at absolute Truth, with a capital 'T,' savoured to me of grim humour. I became not only a Pyrrhonist but a Pessimist into the bargain. Picture to yourself, if you can, my soul starving among these arid surroundings, mental and material. Think of me cutting up bodies by day and minds by night; imagine a being devoid of interest in life, who would go to weddings without joy and to funerals without sorrow, studying sedulously and unremittingly, because it was more trouble to depart from his rut than to go on in it; think of all this and you will have a dim idea of what I was in the first year of my student period at Sebastian's Hospital.

"It was while I was in this state that I first met Barbara."

The Doctor of Medicine paused and drew a long breath. The streak of moonlight had shifted and lit up his pale face like a glory. I gazed towards him in reverent silence. The radiant figure of Barbara seemed to hover in the wan light—the sweet, sunny English girl whom my friend had loved and lost. Outside the wind had risen, the casement clattered, and the yews rustled mournfully, as if in keeping with the tragedy that was being re-enacted in memory. A chill air penetrated through the embrasure. I shivered and drew the blanket closer around my shoulders. The Doctor continued—

"I had turned to my Logic at last, to find how mistaken I had been in imagining I had any. Not unlike M. Jourdain I found, after I had been through the mill, that I had been talking Syllogisms all my life without knowing it. This dissection of Reasoning was the last blow. Body and soul had been subjected to the scalpel, now my very thoughts were generalised and done up into neat little packets. It maddened me to think that I could not argue about anything but Aristotle had ticketed the form of reasoning twenty-two centuries before I was born. I hated Aristotle with a wild and bitter hatred, which even he could not have syllogised, because it was unreasoning. The outlook was not improved by the incessant reminders of human mortality afforded by my logical text-books. They had only one text—"all men are mortal"—and they preached on it in season and out. Whatever they wanted to prove, they proved by means of that lively text. Did they want to show that a certain argumentative process was sound, they started by remarking that all men were mortal, adding that Caius was a man, etc. Did they want to show that the reasoning was unsound, again they trotted out this time-worn text. So far did they carry their homiletic harping that the most famous of all of them—Mill—built up a whole new theory of the Syllogism on the basis of man's mortality. The text-of-all-work did not frighten me off the course of logical study, for death was no bugbear to me. Still it did not contribute to lighten my gloom. Judge then of what a relief it was to me to come across Barbara. Never shall I forget that night. Outside a sooty fog had settled on the town. It was very cold. I crouched over my bleak cindery fire in my comfortless apartment, grinding away at my Logic. Then, in a moment, Barbara came into my life, and all was changed."

Again he paused and seemed to follow some hovering vision with dreamy upturned gaze. I, too, saw Barbara's gracious figure gliding into that lonely garret, where the pale, world-weary, prematurely-aged student bent over the dying fire, the fresh young presence filling the room with sunshine. I saw her stooping ever him with infinite tenderness, and laying her soft white hand upon his rounded shoulder, while from her rosebud mouth there rippled the music of a caressing syllable. I saw an electric thrill traverse his form. He looked up. His worn face met hers radiant with the joy of life. It was

Faust and Marguerite over again. Then I saw their lips pressed together, as they sailed away for Bohemia in a fairy bark over the syren-haunted waters.

> How sad and bad and mad it was,
> But oh! how it was sweet!

The Doctor's voice broke in on my musings.

"Suddenly, as I sat there poring over my book, I caught sight of something that made my whole being thrill. The book fell from my hand, and I gave myself over to a delicious reverie. I had seen Barbara."

"Where?" I asked, puzzled.

"In my book."

"What! In your Logic?"

"Yes; I thought you knew enough of the subject to understand what happened to me, and why Barbara should have been such a reviving influence upon my life."

"But who *is* Barbara?"

"Barbara is a Mnemonic Form—her figure is the first, and she is the first in it. She owes her life not to the father of logic but to some of his mediæval disciples. She was created to jog the memory of students. Her form is most symmetrical—she consists of three universal affirmative propositions, each of which is symbolised in logic by *A*, so that when divested of clothing she reads *A A A*. The ancient logicians, knowing that memory was treacherous, thought their pupils would forget her after the first meeting, so they dressed her elusive vowels with consonants, as thus:—*B A r b A r A*, and they linked her with other forms in a quatrain,

Barbara, Celarent, Darii, Ferioque, prioris, etc. etc.

From which you see that she is the only human member of the dreary group."

"What!" I cried in annoyance. "Your vaunted Barbara is only a logical symbol! The graceful young Figure you pictured is only a Mediæval Mnemonic—a middle-aged Form! I thought she was a reality!"

"To me she is," he said simply. "But if she had been so to others do you think I could have joined the Bachelors' Club?" He pointed proudly to the algæ which floated in the glass button-hole he wore. He always wore algæ or bacteria in his button-hole because they didn't marry. We unscientific members contented ourselves with "bachelor's buttons," a species of ranunculus.

"But you led me to believe that she was alive, that she lived on a farm somewhere about here, and that she wore——"

"O Paul," interrupted the Doctor of Medicine reproachfully, "I distinctly told you the moment you inquired about her that she was ideal—the incarnation of all that is most fair and pure and exquisite in sweet English girlhood. She is the warmth of the heart and the light of the eyes. Her instincts are pure as the white rose she wears at her bosom. She is healthy without——"

"Yes, yes, you did say so, Joseph," I cried conscience-stricken. "How could I ever have doubted your fidelity to the Club? Oh, how stupid I am!"

"Perhaps it is my fault," he said soothingly. "But the thing was so clear to me that I could not imagine anybody else looking at it in a different light. But now, I hope, you understand what Barbara has been to me from the moment she first lit up the pages of my Logic. She was the first human creature I had met in those stony solitudes. The name was like magic to me—it was an electric spark kindling my romantic imagination into an instant flame that warmed the rest of my student life. The dry tinder I had been accumulating served only to add brilliancy to the flame. Coming to me in my pitiful state, those three sweet syllables flashed before me a vision of youth and hope and beauty. My world became transfigured. It was no longer a prison cell of rusted chains and mouldering prisoners, but a paradise full of life and light and loveliness; green spaces of meadow and water, and red-tiled cottages, and the song of larks, and the smell of hawthorn, and new-mown hay, and ruddy orchards, and waving leafage; a place of honest love and healthy labour. Barbara, in short, recalled to me the brighter side of existence, obscured by the disillusioning technicalities of knowledge and dulled by the *weltschmerz* of youth. If you have never known how a mere word can stir the pulses you will not understand me. It is the secret of all poetry. In youth the name of Barbara had been among those that set me dreaming. She stood in the sun, with her shining face and her white dress, and the corn rustled healthily at her feet. I fancy her idyllic character, her being of the essence of English rural life, came from Barbara Allen. There was even a touch about her as of Elia's Quakers, but her demure simplicity only set off her joyous activity the more. Such was the maiden whom Logic brought afresh into my life, to revive my stagnant soul, perishing with blight and drought. You may laugh, and, indeed, sometimes I ask myself whether it was not in a moment of madness, induced by overwork, that she made her impression upon me, whether I am not mad whenever I think of her, which is unfortunately only now and again in my purposeless life. It may be so. Indeed, as a medical man, who has studied morbid psychology with curiosity, I believe it is so. But it is a sweet folly, and it were a greater to be wise. The thought that the world holds such beings as Barbara reconciles me to life."

I had read of *la folie lucide.* Surely Fogson was right in thinking himself mad. I tried to dispel the unhealthy air of sentiment that settled in the room.

"Well, if I had met a General Form called Barbara, I should have conjured up a Salvation Lass."

"She saved *me*," he said quietly. "I grew tenderer to my people—as I called my subjects—for her sake. If I got an isolated arm I used the scalpel more delicately. Perhaps that arm might be Barbara's. The result was that I carried off the medal for skilfullest surgery."

"Ah, that was a tangible advantage now," I said. "Did she ever make you jealous?"

"Never," he said good-humouredly, for the tenseness of his emotion was relaxing under my raillery. "I got her by heart instantly, and she has never quitted me since."

"Oh, of course, she could not say 'no,'" I rejoined, "being wholly composed of affirmative propositions. But did you never try to get hold of her in the flesh?"

"Never," he replied again. "There are so few girls named Barbara. I have never met one and——"

"But why not advertise in the agony columns? 'BARBARA—If any girl so named will call at Sebastian's Hospital, with her certificate of birth, she will hear of something to her advantage.' Or, 'TO BARBARA—If the girl who visited me in my garret on a foggy night ten years ago will return, all shall be forgotten and forgiven.'"

"Please, let it drop," pleaded the Doctor of Medicine, taking a turn for the worse. "I have never gone out of my way to find a Barbara, because, as I told you this morning, I have never been able to take a single step in search of personal happiness. But if ever Fate threw in my path a girl so called, well-grounded as my principles are, I feel that I should drift into marrying her, and no power on earth could stay me. When I meditate upon this aspect of the case I grow certain that I am not sane upon this one point. My case is one of the myriad curiosities of pathology. We are all mad on something. This is my foible. Therefore I would rather not contemplate the contingency. It fevers me." He ceased and turned upon his other side, and the wind again possessed the ear in undivided mastery. The moonlight still lay in a refulgent track across the floor.

"Paul," said the Doctor suddenly, "I cannot sleep. Turn out the moonlight."

I went to the window and pulled down the blind. The village clock struck "Two."

* * * * *

We had hardly been walking for an hour the next morning, when the prophecy of the wind fulfilled itself. Large banks of clouds massed themselves in the sky and melted into swishing showers—the landscape became a water-colour. Fogson wanted me to put up my umbrella, though he had at first objected to my taking it with me; but I could not break through my rule. Besides it was very doubtful whether it would open, the wires were so stiff. But he had to acknowledge its usefulness later on, when the flood drove us to take shelter in a farmhouse and it came in handy to baffle a bull-dog. A dear old creature received us beneath the dripping eaves—one of those old family servants who had ruined Twinkletop—and conducted us from the picturesque porch into an old-fashioned parlour, hung with Scriptural engravings. Here a still dearer and older creature received us with quaint courtesy. She wore a curiously-fashioned cap over her snow-white hair and her face was gentle and guileless and she wore horn spectacles and was evidently got up at all points, *cap-à-pie*, to look like pictures of grandmothers in the Sunday-school magazines. She had a fire lit by which to dry our clothes, though, as she seemed to think her presence necessary to the operation, it was not conducted so thoroughly as we could have wished. But by the time we were accoutred in wonderful coats that had belonged to her deceased husband and supplied with glasses of hot brandy and water, steaming in friendly rivalry with our garments, we began to feel quite friendly towards her.

"What are you doing in these parts?" she inquired kindly.

"Walking," I said.

"What for?" said she.

"Walking," said Fogson.

"You walk for the sake of walking?" she quavered in astonishment.

"We live merely for the sake of living. There is no other reason that will hold water. Why should we not walk for the sake of walking?" Thus the Doctor of Medicine.

That is the worst of Fogson, he will never adapt his conversation to the company.

"Ah, you be a Lunnoner," said she to Fogson.

"We are," we said.

"Ah!" said she, and her wrinkled skin lit up. "Then you know my son John—he went away to Lunnon this thirty year come Martinmas."

We said that we probably knew him but could not recall him for the moment, as we had come across so many people in London.

"Where does he live?" we asked.

"Oh, he's dead this twenty year," she said cheerfully. "He was a gasfitter in Lunnon, but he went away to 'Merica after a year or two and died there."

Our acquaintanceship with John wove a new bond between us and the good old grandame. She pressed us solicitously to stay to dinner, which would be ready at one o'clock, when her son and her daughter would be in, and she would take no refusal, though the unquenchable sun was shining again. She prattled to us with childish faith about Christianity and the parson's sermons, and her comfort in the thought of joining her husband and John, though her children were very good to her, God bless them; and in return, we gave her considerable information about the crops. Ten minutes before one she allowed us to go upstairs to a bedroom and wash. Apparently because it was the tidiest she let us use a room which had every appearance of femininity. The walls were hung with dresses and Biblical texts. The dressing-table was crowded with unmanly articles, including jewels, which made us regret that we were honest. Everything was dainty and neat, and faintly redolent of lavender. It was a large old room, with oaken beams in the ceiling and queer little windows through which the sun streamed with mote-laden rays.

Fogson threw open the folding-windows and looked at the landscape. He never loses an opportunity of looking at the landscape. His vision stretched across the farmyard over a lovely expanse of rural scenery. The raindrops were glistening like diamonds on the hedgerows. Honeysuckle and jasmine climbed up the wall to meet him. Everything was fresh and charming.

"This is the spot," he said at last, "in which Barbara lives."

He spoke calmly. I shivered.

"The sort of spot," I said with a forced laugh, "where your virgin in white would live if she existed. I agree with you."

"Well, do you know," he said, turning from the window and tucking up his shirt-sleeves for the wash, "I have a presentiment that Barbara is near."

I guffawed noisily.

As I was washing, I caught sight of something green projecting from under one of the laced pillows of the bed. I touched it. It was the edge of a book. Anxious to learn what literature was popular in these parts, and whether Eliot Dickray was read, or O'Roherty, I drew it out. It was one of Jane Austen's novels. I was placing it back when I unhappily bethought myself of the fly-leaf. I turned to it. The inscription dazed me. Fogson came and peered over my shoulder. I snapped the cover in haste. Too late. Fogson stuck his thumb in between and opened the book again. He stared at the inscription for a full minute.

"*Barbara Grey.*" So ran the fatal characters in a neat feminine handwriting.

The Doctor of Medicine's eyes filled with the old ecstatic light. We looked at each other with a strange foreboding. Then a fit of trembling seized the Doctor. He dropped the book and fell back helplessly upon the bed.

"The old woman's name is Grey, isn't it?" he whispered, hoarse with emotion.

"Y-e-es," I faltered. "But on second thoughts, don't you think we'd better cut the dinner and get on with our walk? We've made no progress to-day at all."

"Her son—and daughter are coming to dinner," he whispered, half to himself. "I stay here. You can go on if you like."

Considering that I had only left town for his sake, and that he had been constituted Chancellor of the Exchequer, I thought his behaviour most inconsiderate. But I bottled up my spleen and prepared for the worst. In the dining-room the dear old creature introduced us to a stalwart and sheepish young farmer, who she said was her son. I was rejoiced to see no second woman in the room. The Doctor was boiling over with feverish anxiety.

"Where is your daughter?" he asked rudely.

"In the kitchen," quavered the grandame, beaming placidly from behind her horn spectacles. "She is cooking the dinner herself. It will give her an appetite."

Fogson nodded his head in satisfaction—he even saw her making butter. And lo! to my horror, in due course a gracious apparition tripped into the room, a dish of baked potatoes poised on her plump white arms. She curtseyed silently to the visitors, of whose presence she had evidently been warned, and shot a quick glance of rustic curiosity from under her long eye-lashes. She was a dainty little thing, with a complexion like red roses smothered in cream, with dancing limpid eyes, and charming features. Her girlish figure was exquisite in contour. She was dressed in white, and a full-blown white rose heaved with her bosom. The Doctor devoured her with his eyes, and she spoilt his appetite for any other dish. As for me, the thought of M'Gullicuddy nearly choked me. I ate with the heartiness of despair. The meal passed off without much conversation. I tried to interest the young bucolic in cattle and the chances of the harvest, but he seemed unwilling to learn. I let the taciturn bumpkin be—secretly amused at the clumsy manner in which he plied his knife and fork—and tried to draw Barbara out.

"Do you think we shall have any more rain, Miss Grey?"

"Oh no!" she replied at once.

"You are very weather-wise," I said.

"Oh yes," she said, with a little laugh. "It never rains long unless I have a new hat, and my present hat is old enough to frighten the crows."

Evidently Barbara was not logical. But it did not seem to distress the Doctor, who smiled with delight. I thought there was rather a cultured ring about Barbara's voice for a farmer's daughter, but the little attentions she paid to the old lady and the adroit manner in which she carried off the very primitive remarks of the dear old creature, left no doubt of the tender relationship between the twain. The gulf between the old generation and the new is often so pathetically great. Fogson spoke little, and hesitatingly; but embarrassed though he was, he could say nothing without revealing his simple, unselfish nature. Dinner over, the bucolic brother went back to the fields, and after a few polite remarks about the route we were going to take, Barbara naïvely bade us "good-bye." I thought Fogson would never let her little hand go. After this, there seemed nothing for it but to offer the dear old creature our heartiest thanks and feel our way as to offering her more, and I was hastening to execute this delicate task, when Fogson expressed a reluctance to depart without seeing the kitchen. He said he loved these old-fashioned kitchens, with their immense grates and chimneys, and their hanging hams, and their rough old comfort. He stated that he made it a point to see the kitchen whenever he went to a farmhouse, and it would cut him to the heart to go away without seeing this one. The guilelessness of the dear old creature was ill-matched against the cunning of the madman, and she showed us downstairs, and there, sure enough! Barbara, in a great apron, was washing the dishes. She made a pretty grimace when she saw us again. The mad but harmless Doctor of Medicine plucked out his algæ aquarium from his button-hole and ground it under his heel. Then he went up to Barbara without more ado, and in pity I engaged the dear old creature in conversation at a point at which she could not hear, but I could. I thought the attack of insanity had better spend itself. Inwardly I raged at having been converted into a keeper.

"Miss Grey," said the Doctor in low, tremulous tones, "I cannot go away without telling you that I love you."

Barbara opened her blue eyes to their widest.

"That I have loved you all my life."

Barbara laughed low, but without displeasure.

"Were you born only just before dinner?" she said, with consummate self-possession.

"Do not jest with me," he panted. "Ere seen I loved, and loved thee seen. I know you care nothing for money, but I am not poor, and it is not fortune only, but my whole heart that I would offer you. I will not go back without you. Come with me to the wider life of London. Leave these haunts of innocence, and come and shed fragrance and flavour on the jaded metropolis. Bring with you from Arcadia the freshness, and the restfulness, and the gentle ordered life, and the pure milk and butter, and the music of the brooks. Come to the London theatres and bring the scent of hay over the sweltering stalls. Beautiful as is your soul, in its statue-like simplicity, let it be mine to wake it to life and passion. Let me be your Pygmalion. Be my wife, and my life shall be devoted to you. Under my culture your soul shall effloresce into a higher beauty, without losing aught of its freshness. I will——"

A ringing crescendo of laughter filled the old-fashioned kitchen with music. Then the merry little minx had *her* monologue.

"Can't you find a less stale way of proposing, Mr. Fogson? I've read and seen all that on the stage a hundred times. If I got married, it would certainly not be to have any more lessons. I had enough of them at Brussels. And as for the piano, I am sick of it, and am glad to use my fingers for peeling potatoes! Come back to London indeed! Why do you suppose I am here, except to get a breath of country air after the brick and mortar wilderness of London? It would be different if I could go out a lot, for I love waltzing and the opera and farcical comedies, but my married sister, with whom I live in London, has got such a large family now that her whole time is taken up with household duties. She is very well off you know. That was her husband you met at dinner. He is down here on a visit with me and his youngest baby, which is in my charge, and my other brother and sister, who live here with mother on the farm, have gone to our London house instead. He is Stanton, the famous impressionist artist, who exhibits at the Dudley Gallery and the Salon. He fell in love with my eldest sister ten years ago, when he was down here sketching. And he has been good enough to educate me, too. So now, sir, you know all my history, and why Prince Charming's very kind offer does not tempt me, though it has dropped from the clouds."

"But you cannot, you must not dismiss me like this. Think of how long I have waited for you, Barbara."

Even the prosaic shearing away of so many of the attributes of the ideal had not assuaged his distempered longing.

"Why do you call me Barbara?"

"Oh, forgive me. I am mad. I know I have not the right. But I cannot lose you, Barbara. I have found you after such weary years of waiting,—can I go forth into the world again as though you were not? Have pity on me, Barbara, have pity."

"You are making some mistake," said the girl in a puzzled tone. "I am not Barbara."

"Not Barbara?" he echoed.

"No," she replied. "My name is Annie."

"But there *is* a Barbara here," he said desperately.

"Oh yes," said Annie, "I'll go and fetch her."

The poor monomaniac leaned against the kitchen mantel, faint with mortal suspense. It was a tragic moment.

Annie was back in a moment bearing a white bundle in her arms. On being opened, it proved to be a chubby-armed baby about eighteen months old, with a plump undecided face and sparse hair.

"This," said Annie, with a mischievous sparkle in her eye,—"this is Barbara, my sister Barbara's youngest. The baby I told you of."

Fogson gazed at Barbara. All the pent-up passion of a lifetime was in that look.

Not even my conversational resources could keep the dear old creature from her granddaughter's side.

"Be careful of Barby!" she croaked. "Don't drop Barby! Oh my ickle booty! Come to your grandmother, come oo sweet ickle Barbery!"

She caught the infant up in her arms and strained it to her bosom. Fogson's eye followed her jealously.

"There, what do you think of her?" she went on, dandling the baby in Fogson's face. "Isn't she a little beauty? Kiss the gentleman from London."

Barbara turned coyly away and buried her head in her grandmother's bodice. But the Doctor's eager hands, trembling with emotion, were already round Barbara's neck. He pressed his white lips to hers.

That kiss, the hopeless dream of so many years, had come at last. The sight was too sacred for profane eyes. I turned away, my cheek moist and a lump in my throat. Barbara wept too.

In his wildest dreams the poor monomaniac could not have expected so easy a conquest.

"I love you, Barbara," said Fogson passionately.

"Everybody does," said the dear old creature, glowering with delight. "Hush, hush, my Barby."

AFTER WEARY YEARS.

"Yes, but I have loved her for years and years," said Fogson.

"Before she was born, I suppose," said Annie, a whit sharply. "Really, Mr. Fogson, you are original after all. Don't look so surprised, granny. The gentleman is only joking. He said the same thing to me."

"No, no, I was serious!" cried Fogson earnestly.

"You love us both," said Annie, her eyes quizzing him merrily.

"I love Barbara," he urged simply.

"Barbara is married. She was married to a relative of mine, my brother-in-law the artist, ten years ago."

Fogson smote his forehead. "When I first dreamt of her! But I will wait for this one."

"You will not be true to her for so many years."

"I *have* been true to her for so many years."

"Granny," said Annie sedately, "here is a suitor for Barbara. The gentleman wants to marry her."

"Annie," said granny severely, "how can you talk so? You make the gentleman blush."

"No, mammy. His cheek is unblushing. He loves Barbara because she is a girl whose tastes are simple, who is not extravagant, who wears her clothes long (very long), who is not flighty, who doesn't gad about from ball to party, and who, above all, has an ingenuous heart that has never thought of love till he appeared in his beauty and might to call forth the new and undreamt-of emotion; who is frail and helpless without him. That is what men look for in girls, isn't it, Barbara?"

She flicked the baby's nose with her finger till it smiled.

"You're an awfully good match, aren't you, Barbara?

You're a treasure-trove, Barbara; perfectly good, and innocent, and simple, and helpless, and stupid." A flick emphasised each adjective. "Ah me, Barbara, I am afraid my marrying days are over. Why don't the men ask us when we're younger? Oh, what a good girl I was in pinafores!"

"Annie!" said granny.

"Oh but I was, mammy. Don't take away my character before the gentlemen. *Mais si, messieurs: j'étais affreusement bête, je vous en assure.*"

And with that Annie snatched Barbara from the grandmother's arms and fled unceremoniously from the kitchen. Fogson looked vacantly around, and I took advantage of this lucid interval to drag him away. Outside, our friend the bull-dog was waiting for us. While he was dancing round my umbrella with deep-mouthed bark, Annie ran out and boxed his ears till the thunder dwindled to a growl. It was like a story in the novelettes, only the other way round. I took the opportunity to whisper to her not to mind Fogson. He was a fine fellow, with a brilliant intellect, but he had a delusion that he could marry no one but a girl named Barbara.

"If I were with him as you are," she whispered rather contemptuously, "I'd soon cure him of that delusion."

Fogson caught the whisper. It sent a sanative electric shock through him.

"Oh, Miss Grey! If you only could! I should be eternally indebted to you. I know I am not sane on this point. I am a doctor myself. Couldn't I stay at the farm? A week's rest in this peaceful spot would cure me for ever."

She said it was quite impossible. And so he stayed. I knew the rest by letter, for I went home to prepare M'Gullicuddy for the cruel shock.

"Dearest one," said the Doctor of Medicine, as they walked in the rose-garden amid the shadows and scents of the rich summer night. "There is one last boon I would crave. When we are married, will you change your name?"

"Certainly," she said, looking up archly into his handsome pleading face. "It is the usual thing."

"No, no," he said, and drew her fluttering form closer to him. "Not that—I want you to call yourself Barbara."

"No. I cannot," she said. "It would be infringing my sister's birthright."

His poor pathetic mouth pleaded on in piteous silence. It came closer to hers. The moon flew behind a cloud.

"But *you* may call me Barbara if you like."

CHAPTER VIII.

A NOVEL ADVERTISEMENT.

THE President had fallen asleep in his official armchair, and O'Roherty was (saving my presence) alone. The other members had gone up the Square to study the accuracy of the archæological details of the new classical ballet. O'Roherty did not know I was in the room, for, as he seemed engrossed in thought, I did not venture to disturb him. M'Gullicuddy snored steadily.

O'Roherty was seated in front of the one writing-table of which the Club could boast, though it didn't; for the table was a plain mahogany thing, studded with black spots of ink which ought to have been in the usually parched pewter inkstand. The pens were generally cross and spluttering; at other times they were absent.

I saw at once that O'Roherty had got hold of a bad pen by the way his brow was puckered. At last he scribbled something in large letters. I could tell that by the wide sweep of his pen. By this time I was bending over him, but in spite of all my efforts not to disturb him, the intense sympathy I felt for him seemed to subtly communicate itself to him, and to make him aware—by some sacred psychical channel an irreverent world will learn to admit some day—of my proximity. In his delight at my unexpected presence he at once abandoned whatever he was doing, and, covering his writing with a large sheet of blotting-paper, immediately turned his whole attention to me.

"Thought you were at 'Nero'?" he said affably.

"I thought you were?" I said amiably.

"No," he replied, "I have something to think out."

While he was talking his hand idly strayed under the blotting-paper, unconsciously drew out the sheet of paper, and mechanically placed it in his pocket.

"But what keeps you away?" he went on.

"I cannot stand ballets," I replied. "They involve too much mental exertion. The effort to invent a plot for them is too trying."

"Ah, invention of a plot—there is the difficulty. But it is not the worst, not the worst," he sighed.

"No; there is the music to listen to," I said.

"Music be blowed!" O'Roherty replied, as if deciding between wind-instruments and a string band. "I'm not talking of ballets, but of my books."

"Your books? Oh yes, they are the worst," I admitted cheerfully.

"Oh, I don't mind *your* saying that," said O'Roherty good-humouredly, "because you at least read them."

I have never seen O'Roherty in a real live passion. The nearest approach to that state he ever exhibits is when he is taken for an Irishman. He sternly insists that he is not one. He was born, it is true, in County Cork, but as the baby was rocked on the cradle of the deep within a fortnight of its birthday, and the boy lived for ten years in Tripoli before finally settling down in Holborn, the man fails to understand how an Irish infant can be construed into an Irishman. When reminded that the child is the father of the man, he retorts that this only proves that the child, his father, was an Irishman. In spite of all temptations to be logically genealogical, he remains a Cockney, and glories in his country. Nevertheless, every fresh man he meets makes the old mistake. I fancy it is because he speaks without the slightest trace of brogue. When a man is named O'Roherty he cannot afford to do this. People think he is only posing as a Cockney.

If he would only learn some broguish words, such as "yez, avick, spalpeen, acushla, omadhaun, and Caed mille failthe," I should myself feel less strange with him. Not that I care two straws whether he was born in Cork or Cincinnati; only a man owes a certain duty to his neighbours when he is called O'Roherty. For the rest, O'Roherty was tall and thin and ruddy-whiskered, and wore spectacles and a high hat. His mutton-chops were so sanguineous that they seemed slightly underdone. His expression was nervous. He always had the air of awaiting the next man going to twit him with the secret of his birth. I knew he would not be angry at my chaffing his books so long as I left his nationality alone. "I object to being classed among brilliant Irish men of letters," he once informed me plumply. The constant irritation added to his constitutional melancholy.

"You at least read my books," said O'Roherty again.

It was evidently a sore topic.

"Look here." He drew out a scrap of newspaper, mounted on the well-known brown background of a popular press-cutting agency. "Read this," he said.

I read it.

From *The Dissenters' World*, July 5*th*.

"A Summer Idyll.—Mr. O'Roherty's practised hand is seen to advantage in this pretty pastoral story of an idle summer. The love-scenes are exquisite in their union of purity and passion, while the descriptions of scenery are charming and recall Ruskin in his happiest moments. The tender grace of a holiday that is dead lives again in these felicitous silhouettes. *A Summer Idyll* may be safely recommended to parents and guardians. Though the author is an Irishman there is no theological bias in this simple idyll, which may be introduced without fear into the most Protestant families."

O'Roherty ground his teeth as I returned the critique. I knew why. It was not only the allusion to his race that galled him.

In saying that I read his books, O'Roherty did me an injustice. Still, I did skim them, and I had gleaned sufficient of *A Summer Idyll* to know that it was a terribly ironical title, and that the whole of the sordid tragi-comedy centred round Camberwell Green.

"Well, and what do you say to this criticism?" he said grimly.

"It is too bad," I replied.

"Yes," he said despondently. "It will sell some copies. The paper has an immense circulation all over the country among families that really buy books—especially those bad books which are called 'good books.'"

"What an ass the man must be!" I exclaimed.

"He is not an ass," he retorted indignantly. "He is my bitterest friend."

"Friend or no friend, he must be an ass to write like this about one of the most brutally realistic stories of modern times."

"He is not an ass," he repeated. "He simply didn't read the book."

"Oh, then he is certainly not an ass," I admitted, "but an ingenious deducer of contents from title. It's an economical way of reviewing, but you are bound to go and put your foot in it one day—by a fluke."

"Yes, but I must say he isn't entirely to blame," said O'Roherty. "It's my publisher's fault partly."

"Your publisher?"

"Yes; he will allow the sheets to be bound in such a way that you have to cut the sides to skim the book. Parker—that's his name—doesn't mind running his eye along two pages connected at the top, but, when their union is perpendicular, the thing is impossible."

"But why doesn't he cut the leaves?"

"What! and spoil the market-value of the book! Surely you know that reviewing is the least paying form of journalism, and that no man with brains would do it if it were not for the perquisites. But for the sale of the unread books, criticism in this country would become a lost art. No, Parker's intentions were admirable. He saw *A Summer Idyll* lying about in *The Dissenters' World* office, and he saw my name on the thing; so, of course, he asked the editor to let him do it."

"And he has gone and done it!" I said. "Well, never mind, the parents and guardians who buy your book for their girls will never know of their fearful mistake. The girls will never tell them. They will——"

"Hush!" interrupted O'Roherty. "What's that?"

We listened to the sudden silence which had caught the novelist's acute ear. It was M'Gullicuddy not snoring. We waited anxiously. The president took up his nasal theme again and we resumed our conversation. O'Roherty did not care for everybody to know that he was *the* celebrated O'Roherty. He was very sensitive on this point; and, knowing that people *will* always peep behind pen-names, he had hit upon the happy idea of effectually concealing himself by writing under his real name. I was the only member of the Club to whom the secret was open. Like most of us O'Roherty had to live; if he had not swallowed some of his convictions he would have had nothing to eat. Bitter experience had taught him that the British public will not read novels without a love-interest; and if there was one thing in this world in which O'Roherty did not believe (there was nothing in any other world in which he did) it was love. Having to write "true-till-death" moonlight scenes fretted him not only as a man but as a Bachelor. His only consolation was that their pathos afforded him so much amusement. But M'Gullicuddy on his sublime snow-clad mountain-peak of Bachelordom had little sympathy with the frailties of those that groped in the valley; that was why O'Roherty was in such trepidation on hearing the president cease to snore. The steward, who was behind the bar, listening, we never regarded as an obstacle to confidential conversation; he was not a human being like ourselves; he was a married man.

"Next to the inaccurate statement as to my nationality, what riles me most in this notice," went on O'Roherty, "is the eulogium of my descriptions of scenery. As a matter of fact there is not a single description of scenery in the book. Scenery was always my weak point. I can no more paint a landscape than a Royal Academician. I have sometimes stolen a meadow from Ruskin, and I have several skies strongly tinged with Black; most of my flowers are picked from the lady novelists' back-gardens; while I get my birds from Richard Jefferies."

O'Roherty began to get quite doleful in tone.

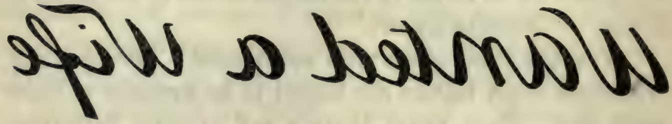
"Don't be so down in the mouth about it, old fellow," I said. "Nobody knows."

"Yes, but what of my own conscience? Besides, my wholesale depredations are bound to be brought to light some day. Then again there's my antique furniture. I have always got that at Ouida's. But now the critics are beginning to say that her Louis Quinze boudoirs are a fraud, and her cinque cento medallions (I fancy they are medallions) are coined at the mint of her imagination. It's a nice thing when your supports give way under you in this fashion, and your antique easy-chair collapses and leaves you on the floor. Then, look what dreadful suspicions it brings into your mind; suppose your lady novelists' botany is a ghastly imposition—and you are left up a tree! and you don't even know the name of the tree! How if your chaffinches sing in England or your nightingales perform in London during the season of their foreign or provincial tours! How if your artichoke blooms in the autumn and your chrysanthemum chortles in the spring! How if——"

"Good heavens!" I interrupted with a cry of pain. "What is this?"

While O'Roherty was speaking I had unconsciously taken up the blotting-paper. There were heavy black marks upon it. Practice has made me able to read writing backwards or upside-down as quickly as forwards or normally. O'Roherty's face turned the colour of a sheet of note-paper, of the pink variety.

"What is this?" I repeated sternly, as I pointed with my finger to those ghastly incriminating stains upon the pure fluffy surface of the blotting-paper.



"N—nothing," he stammered.

"O'Roherty!" I said, with a world of reproach in my tremulous tones. "On your honour as an Englishman!"

"Draw your own conclusions," he replied, visibly softened.

"There is no deduction necessary. The conclusion is on the premisses," I observed sadly, reading aloud the infamous inscription—

"WANTED A WIFE."

"Yes, I am advertising for a wife," he replied apologetically and with a meek pathos that went to my heart. "I can stand the strain no longer. I was just about to draw up the advertisement when you interrupted me."

"But how? why?" I inquired wildly.

"I have told you," he said, snatching the paper from me and rising in excitement. "Birds, beasts, and fishes."

Was his mind wandering? Birds, beasts, and fishes! What old schoolboy chords were struck by the phrase!

"Are you making game of marriage?" I said.

"No, no, I'm serious. I want birds, beasts, fishes, flowers, trees, furniture, bric-a-brac, and a thousand odds and ends. I *must* have them. I *must* have them, I tell you." His voice rose to a maniacal scream. I grew seriously alarmed. Coming on the top of his wish to marry, language like this seemed to clinch the evidence of his insanity. Was Fogson's monomania epidemic?

"Hush! you'll disturb M'Gullicuddy's snoring!" I said softly. "Cannot you get all these things as a Bachelor?"

"Impossible! Have I not already explained to you how my literary life has been one long fraud? No, I must have some one to supplement me, to supply all those ingredients of the novel which O'Roherty lacks: beasts, birds, fishes, flowers——"

"Spare me the catalogue," I cried severely, "I understand."

"I knew you would," he returned, a slight misapprehension of my meaning bringing a grateful look into his worried eyes. "You see, to a Cockney like myself Nature is utterly unknown. I lack that rural education without which the modern novelist has no chance. It was all very well for a Dr. Johnson to say, 'Sir, let us take a walk down Fleet Street!' In his day Nature had not been invented. There were certain stock adjectives which you had to get up—'azure sky,' 'russet leaves,' 'pearly cloud,' 'translucent brook.' Once you knew these married couples that went out together as invariably as Homer's Juno with her 'ox-eyed' cavalier, you were set up as a writer. That long catalogue of a poet's stock-in-trade which convinced Rasselas that it was useless for him to apprentice himself to the muse, was a mere flight of Johnson's imagination, intended to crack up the calling in which he was then an acknowledged master. To-day it is a sober reality, and is even more necessary for the novelist than for the poet, who can always veil himself in the obscurities of misty magnificence. Ah, it was a bad day for writers when those ancient couples were divorced; when for the marriages made in the classics were substituted the laxer alliances of individual preference, and for the good old permanence of conjoint relation, the haphazard and transient associations of modern free selection. It is a flux and chaos of conjunctions at best, and in the looser literature of the French decadence it leads to the most extravagant matches of substantives and epithets. There is no adjective so degraded that it may not hope to mate with the most proper of nouns; no noun so common that it may not find itself in at least temporary association with the most aristocratic of adjectives. Nay, so far has this derangement of epithets gone, that I have known unprincipled writers wed words that belong to different castes, and talk of strawberry-coloured symphonies and symphonic strawberries."

He paused for want of breath, and I fetched him a pick-me-up.

"Where was I?" he asked, when he had gulped it down.

"Symphonic strawberries," I observed. But he had lost the thread.

"Well, anyhow, as I was saying, the modern novelist has a hard time of it. He is expected to know all things in heaven and earth and in the waters beneath the earth. The miserable impostors who were first in the field went and corrupted the reading public by showering down omniscience from a cornucopia. Of course it was all faked; they crammed up as much about hunting, and shooting, and fishing, and burgling, and will-making, and gardening, and painting, and sailing, and climbing, and banking, and bee-keeping; as much dialect, slang, idiom, proverb, local colour, history, tradition, and superstition, as was wanted for each book; and before the book had gone to press it was all clean wiped off their memories, which had reverted to their original omnescience. (Excuse the neologism, but the language wants the word badly). By this sort of behaviour the beggars have set up a standard which is simply unattainable by an honest man; not to mention that they have snapped up all the best things of their successors. Analyse the average modern novel. What do you find?"

I made no effort to find anything, but he struggled with his waistcoat pocket and produced a scrap of paper, from which he read aloud :—

Scenery (including botany),	15	per cent.
Journeys, foreign phrases, manners and customs,	11	per cent.
Birds, beasts, and fishes,	10	per cent.
Scientific, musical, artistic, historical, and literary allusions or quotations,	10	per cent.
Descriptions of dress,	10	per cent.
Theology and ethics (new),	10	per cent.
Plot,	10	per cent.
Ordinary natural dialogue,	8	per cent.
Grammatical and other blunders,	6	per cent.
Portraits of hero and heroine,	4	per cent.
Character-drawing,	2	per cent.
Wit and humour,	0·008	per cent.
Unanalysable residua,	3·992	per cent.
Total, Three Vols.,	100	per cent.

I was about to dispute the accuracy of this decomposition, but he went on :—

"This analysis is at once the cause and excuse of my marriage. Once I had arrived at these results I felt that I was a doomed man. You will perceive that nearly half a vol. of a modern novel must be composed of scenery. In addition to my being unable to tell an oak from an acorn, or a gentian bush from a gillyflower, or a field of oats from a gorse-clad common, or an elder from Susannah, I am colour-blind. Moreover, I have no interest in the sunset, and am never up late enough to witness the sunrise. The sight of the sea is as sickening to me as if I were on it. What people can see to rave over in a magnified wash-hand basin I have never been able to understand. You smile. You remember my much-praised apostrophe to the ocean in *Betwixt the Gloaming and the Nether Sea.* I have no wish to disguise from you the pricks of conscience. But I must live. I tell my conscience so, and point out that if I were to die it would perish too. To keep my conscience alive, I steal."

"Steal ?" I echoed, "steal what ?"

"Haven't I told you ?—trees, flowers, sunsets, birds, beasts—all 's fish that comes to my net," said O'Roherty. "What can a poor Cockney do ? Take the second item. I recognise a horse, a dog, a sheep, a mackerel, a cow, a cock, an elephant, an earthworm, a sparrow, a donkey, a butterfly, an eel, a baby, and a few other animals. But even with dogs I can't tell a dachshund from a poodle, though I give my old maids poodles and my heroes dachshunds; I know that a Scotch terrier is the same fore and aft, but that is only because of Bright's famous comparison of it to the Fourth Party. Allusions I can manage fairly well with the help of encyclopædias. I dip at random into omniscience and garnish my dialogue with whatever comes up. I make pot-shots at a volume of poems and ornament my chapters with the spoils. As for dress, I am hopelessly lost. These superficial details are infinitely wearisome to me; in real life my eye goes straight for the psychological essence of a situation, and I have a soul above buttons. Unfortunately the soul of the British public is beneath them. And sometimes I feel that there is something in frocks after all. When I create a nice heroine I don't like the girl to dress dowdily. It spoils her charm. When all is said, she is my own child and I don't want her to look gawky and blame the old man. I am not stingy, I want her to dress as magnificently as possible. But my own ignorance sets up sumptuary laws, and the poor thing comes off but scantily. I don't know what to put on her—muslins, silks, a sealskin jacket, my wardrobe contains little else. In the end I am reduced to stealing from the fashion-plates, and Myra alone knows what a mull I make of it. For you see I can use the descriptions but warily, the nomenclature has grown so beastly technical that I am afraid to venture. I can't tell a description of a costume from a dinner menu. What gold galloon, or blue broché, or jet passementerie, or basques, or toreadore hats, or silk lisse, or moiré, or pink chiffon, or filoselle, or bengaline, or festooned skirts, may be, I haven't the faintest idea, but all my heroines wear them and look natty in them. I can only hope that they are not indecent. But I can't expect immunity for ever. Some day I shall introduce a half-clad virgin to a respectable dinner party and then the book will sell by tens of thousands."

His tones trembled sadly into silence. I could offer him but cold comfort. He went on:—

"I must learn these words if I would avoid such popularity. There's no such word as *faille* in the dictionary of the male novelist. But he has got to admit it. *Faille* is becoming very prevalent. I see it in all the ladies' letters. Are *my* girls to be out of the fashion? No, it shall never be. I will do my duty by them. Oh, if I knew more of my girls' inner lives! They say Dickens detected George Eliot was a woman by the way Hetty Sorrel combed her hair. How am I to know how ladies comb their hair? The novelist must needs be a Peeping Tom, and if he is he is sent to Coventry.

"In journeys, etc., I am so and so. My first success, as you know, was due to my infantile recollections of Tripoli, and to the happy title of my first-born three-decker, *Tripoli Triplets.* You remember Tripoli carried me successfully through my second novel; and, through my third, in which the relics of my Tripolese recollections were hashed up and located in Patagonia. But my fourth, in which the foreign flavour was replaced by the scent of English hay, and where the heliotrope of the lady novelist was substituted for the palms and pomegranates of Barbary, was only a mild success. And now this last book, *A Summer Idyll,* in which I left off shamming and fell back upon the Cockney scenes and people I really know, is a regular frost, as you might expect of an English summer. The things I am really good in—plot, character-drawing, real human dialogue——"

"And unanalysable residua," I reminded him.

"And unanalysable residua, form only twenty-eight per cent. of the compound I have to turn out from my Holborn laboratory. I have tried to do right. I have done my best to learn the difference between maiden-hair fern and mangelwurzel. It's no use going to the country unless you have somebody skilled in plant-lore with you. And there are very few real savants in those branches, I can tell you."

"You ought to have gone walking with Fogson before he got engaged."

"What nonsense! He only knew the scientific names, not the real names. He knew a vegetable, I gave him one day when he was dining with me, was a *Lycopersicum esculentum*, but was surprised to learn it was a tomato. I spent a whole day once in Kew Gardens, where the trees are obliging enough to grow labelled, and I plucked a leaf from every tree and shrub and scratched its name on the back. Leaving the Gardens, I noticed a notice-board which informed me I was liable to prosecution if caught. I was too busy boiling down a classical botanical treatise into an edition for the use of schools to attend to my treasures for some months; when I did, they were a heap of withered leaves, like the fabled fairy gold. So perished my dream of knowledge. Can you wonder, then, that I must either marry or give up writing altogether and turn my hand to something——"

"Useful," I concluded. "But where does the necessity of marriage come in? You want a collaborator, not a wife."

"I want a wife, not a collaborator. I want some one to share the work, not the money or the reputation. Come, help me to draw up the advertisement."

"Very well," I said resignedly. Poor M'Gullicuddy snored on, in blissful unconsciousness of the coming blow.

"Wanted—a Wife," wrote O'Roherty again, in the boldest of letters, as if to give himself courage.

"Of course," he said pausing, "there are many other reasons why I should marry. You see it is now some six years since I set up in London as a genius. I have failed.

It is time I should now settle down into a steady popularity. Perhaps, too, when I have made all the money I want, I may get the reputation of genius after all by neglecting my wife. If I have none to neglect, this avenue of recognition is necessarily closed to me. Moreover, marriage itself is a considerable fillip to a man's reputation; you are bound to get pars in the papers. It is an immense advertisement. Besides, your readers like it. They are knit to you by fresh ties on discovering that romance is a reality with you, that you do not believe that the honeymoon is made of green cheese. Many a declining novelist has acquired a fresh lease of popularity by marriage. The wedding bells, which usher his characters into the Nirvana of the Finis, are to the novelist but the joy-bells of palingenesis."

I fetched him another pick-me-up and he resumed the concoction of his matrimonial advertisement, keeping up a commentatorial monologue as he went on.

Wanted—a Wife. Musical, Literary, Artistic, Scientific. The more she knows about sonatas in B flat, and the precise emotion that a soulful heroine must feel under the prelude to Parsifal, the better. I have always been in danger of letting my people polka to Masses in D minor. She will also save me from mis-regulating the movements of the planets or confounding Botticelli with a kind of hurdy-gurdy. *Much-travelled in England and the universe generally.* That's for the foreign department. I don't know whether a Devonshire lass is blonde or brunette, and there's nothing like bringing local colour to the cheek of the young person. *Polyglot.* That's to keep the Italian and the French and the German in order.

Thoroughly familiar with Dress-making, Tailoring, Kitchen-Gardening, Botany, Mineralogy, Birds, Beasts, and Fishes, Antique and Modern Furniture, Prize-fighting, Manners and Customs of Good and Bad Society, and every other variety of useful or useless imformation."

"Why not put 'an encyclopædia in a petticoat'? It's shorter."

"The petticoat may be shorter, but at the cost of lucidity."

"Well, say a 'Universal Provider and a Genius.'"

"*A Genius not objected to,*" added O'Roherty. "Thank you. *Great imaginative power a recommendation.* There is no harm in her being good at plots and character-drawing while she is about it."

"Not the least," I assented.

"Is there anything else?" he asked, re-reading it critically.

"Cookery?"

"*Cookery.* Thank you."

"But geniuses can't cook."

"*Theoretical only.* Thank you, anything else?"

"Beautiful?"

"Oh, of course! I can study her attitudes and toilettes without impertinence or cribbing from the lady novelists. She shall sit to me—or to herself—as heroine. *Beautiful.* Anything else?"

We paused and racked our brains for five minutes. M'Gullicuddy snored on. The steward was all ears.

"Fool!" cried O'Roherty at last, smacking his brow. And he solemnly added "*No Irish need apply.*"

A loud suspicious gurgle burst from the steward's lips. It sounded like a strangled laugh. M'Gullicuddy awoke and yawned. The next moment he learnt the news and all was dark to him again.

* * * * *

O'Roherty did not return from his honeymoon in Tripoli for a year. Then he came back to England and paid the expenses of publication of *Goeth Down as a Gossamer*, a three-volume novel by Mrs. O'Roherty (Pansy Sinclair). *He had married a Lady Novelist.* He wrote no more himself; he was pumped out, and his wife kept whatever knowledge and creative power she possessed for her own works.

"It was my own fault, Paul," he said, on the only occasion I met him, for he shunned the abodes of men and Bachelors, "I forgot to put that limitation in the advertisement."

"But did she really claim to fulfil all the other conditions?"

"She did."

"But does she?"

"Ah," said O'Roherty mysteriously, "she has a great imagination."

CHAPTER IX.

A NEW MATRIMONIAL RELATION.

August found the premises of the Bachelors' Club entirely given over to the orgies of the dusky steward, and of Willoughby Jones and the other waiters, for London became too hot to hold us. To escape the heat, Mandeville Browne fled to the Soudan; Moses Fitz-Williams went to Switzerland; M'Gullicuddy was understood to have pitched his tent somewhere amid his native heather; while Oliver Green told us that he had to stay at Brighton with his wealthy uncle, who had returned from India only last year. Poor Oliver! It was by no means the first time that he had been forced to endure the society of his old fogey of a relative. He said his uncle required a deal of looking after. Selfish old curmudgeon! I hated Oliver's uncle, with his parchment-coloured visage, and his gouty toe, and his disordered liver. You might call me prejudiced, for I had never met the man, but who could help disliking an apoplectic old egotist, who cooped his nephew up in scorching, stony Brighton, just because he had a few miserable lacs of rupees to leave behind him? If I were Oliver, I thought at first, I would rather die a pauper than live at the beck of a whimsical, capricious autocrat.

But there is one advantage I found in having a rich old uncle; he saves you the trouble of making up your mind. For nights I lay tossing on my bed, unable to settle where I should go. Even when I determined "Heads" should be the Continent, and "Tails" Great Britain, I always lost the toss, and was dissatisfied. I thought of Oliver's wealthy uncle frequently in my indecision, and at last began to wish he had been mine. Then the inspiration came! I had only to fancy he *was* mine, and my doubts were at an end, my troubles were over. I, too, would go down to Brighton. The burden was lifted from my shoulders; that night I slept like a top. Steaming down by the luxurious express, I felt happier than I had been for a long time. I should not be alone in Brighton. I should be bound to meet Oliver and his uncle, and then I could tell Oliver what I thought of his subjection to his yellow-gilded relative. Perhaps I might even induce him to enfranchise himself. I promised myself to put in a good word for him with his neglected relative after he should have shaken off the dust of Brighton in dudgeon. One owes these things to one's friends. The task of smoothing down another man's outraged uncle might not be agreeable, but I registered a mental vow to attempt it.

As soon as I had taken a hurried meal at my hotel I sallied forth in quest of Oliver; but he was neither on the beach, nor the promenade, nor the pier. I looked into all the bath-chairs, half expecting to find him wheeling his uncle in one. After several wasted hours I returned to my hotel fatigued and dispirited. After several wasted days I returned to London unrefreshed and uneasy. Oliver was not in Brighton. An exhaustive study of all the visitors' lists for the past fortnight had made this well-nigh certain. Where could he be? Why spread this false report of his movements? Could it be that he was rusticating perforce in London, and that false shame had made him cover up his poverty? Impossible! Oliver had always given proof of ample resources —much more so than myself. It was this that made his subservience to his uncle so annoying. No, there was some more occult reason behind. The mysteries of my brother-Bachelors had hitherto invariably ended in marriage. Is it to be wondered at that I instantly leapt at the truth in this case too? Alas, that I should have been a true prophet!

The discovery of Oliver's whereabouts came in this wise. I was cudgelling my brains to remember if he had ever given any signs of defection of the heart from us. As I pondered over the past I could not help being reminded of the young man's intense truthfulness. On such occasions as I had taken the trouble to test his autobiographical statements, I had always found fifty per cent. of truth in them. The conviction grew upon me that I had wronged him, that he *was* at Brighton after all, even if with a nearer relative than his uncle, for perchance he was spending his honeymoon there. I had but skimmed the faces of the bi-sexual couples, seeking only a male pair—an old man and a young. What if I had skipped Mr. and Mrs. Green?

I resolved to return to Brighton. I consulted an A B C railway guide. As I gazed, I gave a convulsive start. A name caught my eye—New Brighton. My instinct is seldom at fault. I started for Liverpool at once. The same afternoon I saw Oliver Green lying on the beach. A little dark-featured toddler, of about five or six, emptied buckets of sand upon his gently heaving waistcoat. Recumbent in a half-sitting posture by his side, was a well-dressed lady, whose face I could not see, for it was shaded by a red parasol, but from the irritating way the little tyrant occasionally tugged with his tiny hands at the parasol I could see it was his mother's. It did not need a second glance to establish the child's relationship to Oliver. The likeness was unmistakable; I could see Green in his eye, and Oliver in his mouth, and father in the way he allowed the slimy-shoed bantling to dance on his breast. I kept cool with a great effort, for it was a broiling day. I was not so overwhelmed as I should have been six months before; bitter experience had schooled me. Still, this was the worst case of all. For some minutes I looked on in silence at the domestic idyll. I did not intrude upon it. I stole away, my breast in a tumult. This, then, was the meaning of Oliver's periodical visits to his uncle! He was such an inveterate evader of a lie that he might even have referred to the raising of money for surreptitious household expenses.

The next morning I met Oliver in the Atlantic. I swam up to him, and in a jocund tone gave him good-morning.

He was so startled that he imbibed a mouthful of sea-water, retired for a moment, and came up gurgling and spluttering.

In answer to his spasmodic syllables, I replied that my coming was fortuitous. I then wished him joy of his marriage, and remarked cheerfully that his name would be handed down to eternal execration.

He stared at me with a fishy eye from between the billows, then threw up his arms and sank. On his return he replied that he had been laughing like a submarine telephone. He was not married at all.

It was now my turn to feel for the bottom of the Atlantic. As I rose I felt that Oliver did not deserve to live. Oh the poor trusting woman with the red parasol! Oh the pocket-edition of Oliver with the spade and the sand-bucket!

We met outside our machines, but I turned away in disgust. Oliver was about to speak, when his little boy ran up, pursued by a fat, panting ayah. Oliver caught the little lad up in his arms and kissed him, and remarked "Oopsi-daisey," and dandled him over his head, after which he surrendered him to the lady with the red parasol, who had by this time toiled up.

"How did you like your bath, Oliver?" she asked, with a loving glance.

"Glorious!" he said; "I wish I could persuade you to try a dip."

She shook her head.

"But to-morrow the little man must——"

Again she shook her head. Her face was still half obscured by a veil, but nothing less opaque than corduroy could hide its harshness and irregularity. It was bronzed and bearded like a trooper's. Her figure was less uncomely, being plump and passable. Her age was certain; it was over half a century. I wondered at Oliver's taste. Still, she might have been beautiful in the far-off happy days.

He turned to me, as I stood glued to the spot.

"Paul," said he, "let me introduce you to Julia—I mean Miss Blossom."

I blushed for him, as he effected the introduction.

"You haven't introduced me to this little chap," I said genially, caressing the child's curls.

I was glad to see Oliver blush in his turn. His embarrassment was most painful. He hummed and hawed and stammered.

"This—this—is little Oliver."

I let a moment of severe silence pass by, then I said smiling, "And little Oliver is your——"

"Uncle!" he said desperately,—"precisely."

If I had not been resting on a stick I should have sat down on the sand. Miss Blossom did so instead, and took out some crochet, while Oliver's uncle went trapezing about the beach, pursued by the ayah.

"Your uncle from India?" I managed to ejaculate at last.

"The same! Be quiet, Oliver!" he snapped, as his uncle ran between his legs and nearly upset him. "Yes, that is he. He is an orphan, and was brought over last year by his aunt, Miss Blossom. I am his guardian and trustee under my grandfather's will, and I feel it my duty to go and see the little beggar three or four times a year. As I told you before, he requires a lot of looking after. But please don't tell anybody. It 's such an abnormal case. It makes me look so awfully ridiculous, and I try to keep the real fact dark. You know if there is one thing in the world I hate it 's being made ridiculous; especially when I 'm not a whit to blame."

"Oh, you may rely on me," I said, gripping his hand sympathetically. "But is it possible that a mite of a lad like that should be your uncle?"

"I wish it wasn't," he said gloomily. "But it ciphers out very simply, extraordinary and unique as it all is. My grandfather married my grandmother out in India when she was fourteen. It 's the climate, you know. She had a daughter at fifteen, who was my mother. This daughter also married young—at fifteen, and I was born before she was sixteen. Her mother—my grandmother—had gone on bearing children, and her latest success was won at the abnormal age of forty-eight, which is almost the extreme possible limit. But she died in the attempt, leaving little Oliver motherless. That was six years ago, and his father—my grandfather—dying last year, the orphan lad was bequeathed to the care of Miss Blossom (his aunt) and myself."

"I understand," I said mendaciously; "but would you mind putting it down on paper?"

Between us we got down the figures. While I was studying them a sudden thought flashed upon me that almost stopped my pulse.

"Why, Oliver!" I thundered, "this makes you only twenty-three!"

He turned sea-green, and his knees shook. His sin had found him out.

"O Paul!" he said, "don't betray me. I know I have made and procured false declarations of age. But what does it matter? My Indian descent ripened me early. I had a thick beard at seventeen, almost as thick as I have now. There was curry in my blood, remember that, Paul. I may be twenty-three in the letter, but in the flesh and spirit I am thirty. Ah! let me be thirty-one still to Mandeville Brown and M'Gullicuddy. Is it not a sufficient counterweight that my mature appearance makes my avuncular relation all the more ridiculous? Ah, Paul, you will keep that secret too—at least till the child grows up?"

"Till death," I replied solemnly.

Oliver thanked me with a look, then ran to disengage his uncle from the irate clutches of a little girl whom he had playfully prodded in the nose with his spade. He carried his struggling and kicking relative back to

where I stood. Then he shook his uncle from India, and slapped his hands, and said, "Naughty, naughty."

His uncle from India yelled like a Cherokee on the war-path.

"And is he so rich?" I asked.

"Beastly rich," he said.

He seated his wealthy uncle from India on his shoulder, and tried to pacify him, but in vain. The avuncular yoke sat by no means lightly upon his shoulders. Aunt Julia had to get up and entreat the demon to leave off.

"Tan't leave off till you give me a penny," said the poor young uncle, sobbing hysterically.

"Where's the penny I gave you last night?" said Oliver.

"I spent it on seed-cake," said his wealthy uncle from India.

The nephew shook his head at his reprobate, profligate, prodigal young uncle.

"Well, well," he said sternly, "here you are, but not another penny do you get from me to-day."

The uncle received his nephew's bounties without gratitude. He grabbed the coin and climbed down from Oliver's shoulders. The next minute he was twenty yards up the beach dissipating his nephew's hoardings in the society of an apple-woman. O woman! woman!

"It's no small responsibility to be a nephew," sighed Oliver, "when one is saddled with a scapegrace young uncle. O Paul, I cannot describe how acutely I feel the absurdity of this relationship, and I hope *you* will not either."

Again I crushed his fingers between mine.

But he might just as well not have exacted a promise from me, for the whole story was in the *Porcupine*, a

Liverpool satirical paper, before the week was out. The port roared; and busy Liverpudlians went down to their watering-place, just to see the uncle and the nephew. The particulars were stated in the big Liverpool dailies, and the paragraphs were copied by the general press, and even formed the staple of an article in the *Daily Wire,* which considered the freak of genealogy in the light of the Bhagavad Gita, the folklore of Japan, the Œdipus of Sophocles, the careers of Charlemagne, Octavius Cæsar, Hamlet and Heinrich Heine, the habits of the Ornithorhynchus, Mr. Gladstone, and various other associated topics. That settled poor Oliver. After he had read the jokes in the local comic paper he never smiled again. But when the *Daily Wire* leader, with its elephantine humour, came within his ken, he was a ruined man. Within a week the banns were up in New Brighton for the marriage of Oliver Green and Henrietta Blossom.

I went to Oliver to point out the error of his ways.

"Go away, sir," he shouted, "you have made me the laughing-stock of the country."

"I?" I exclaimed indignantly.

"Yes, you. Who else sent the facts to the *Porcupine?*"

"I don't know," I said hotly, for I was exceedingly annoyed at having lost the opportunity. Since some one was to reap the reward of indiscretion, why not I as well as another?

"You are too modest," he sneered.

"Wring my withers as you will," I answered, remembering my high mission, "I have come to save you."

"Pray save yourself—the trouble," he said; "I know what I am about."

"I doubt it," I retorted.

"Do you insinuate that I am mad?'

"No; only headstrong."

"A euphemism for weak-headed, I suppose. However, you shall hear. Then you will judge me more leniently. Do you know why I am marrying Miss Blossom?"

"Assuming you are sane—no."

"Miss Blossom is little Oliver's aunt."

He paused impressively, as if he had revealed the secret of the universe. My doubts of his sanity vanished. They were changed into certainties.

"You don't seem to take it in."

"No wonder," I said, "I knew the fact long ago."

"Yes, but put two and two together, man. As Oliver's nephew I am the scoff and byword of the kingdom. By marrying his aunt I become his uncle. As his uncle I shall regain the respect which I have forfeited by your blabbing."

I allowed the libel to pass unchallenged. I could hardly utter a syllable for sheer blank astonishment. The floodgates of speech were checked by a dam.

"Swear away!" said Oliver. "Add insult to injury. Don't put yourself in my place. Don't remember how thin my skin is, and how it quivers under the lash of ridicule. Tell me that I ought to bear the flail, as if I were a rhinoceros. Oh, to drag on a wretched existence, the butt of all the witlings, pointed out by the digit of derisive Demos,—anything rather than that! anything rather than that!"

"Wretch! Coward!" I cried sternly. "And for mere petty personal considerations you would eclipse the gaiety of nations!"

"I would. I never set up as an altruist. There are only two exits from this frightful situation. In only two ways can I cease to be my uncle's nephew. One is by murder. I can take him out bathing and lose him. But in this Philistine country that is not, I fear, a practicable exit. The other is marriage. Only by becoming my ward's uncle and making him his guardian's nephew can the normal rôles be restored. Then I shall be able to hold up my head again in the world. I shall be able to present my young ward without blushing. A new matrimonial relation will spring up between me and him. He will be the nephew and I shall be the uncle."

Murder or suicide! It was indeed a horny dilemma!

"But what does Miss Blossom say?" I asked.

"She is willing to sacrifice herself on the altar of my salvation," he said, in moved tones.

A world of unspoken emotion surged in my chest as I turned away.

Next day a gleam of hope visited me. In return I visited Miss Blossom in her private room. She lived on the Parade, locally known as the Hamanegg Terrace. I went straight to the point. I said, "I have come to warn you. Mr. Green cannot marry you."

She put her hand to her bosom.

"Why not?" she breathed.

"Because there is a secret in his life—something that you do not know."

"Oh my heart," she gasped, "I feared so; he is——"

"A Bachelor," I said unrelentingly, yet a tremor of sympathy in my voice.

She briefly informed me of the position of the door. I was prepared for discourtesy, so was not put out by it. I appealed to her to have some regard for Oliver's relatives. She curled her moustache haughtily and asked what I meant.

"See here," I said; "if Oliver is Oliver's uncle, and Oliver is Oliver's nephew, then if Oliver marries you, who are Oliver's aunt, Oliver will become Oliver's nephew, and Oliver will become Oliver's uncle, therefore Oliver becomes his own great-uncle, and Oliver——"

"Hold on," she said. "Which Oliver is Oliver's uncle, and which Oliver is Oliver's nephew?"

"Both are either, and each is the other," I said. "It's as plain as a pikestaff. If Oliver——"

"*Which* Oliver?" she said desperately.

In deference to her inferior intellect, I went out of my way to make it as childish as A, B, C.

"Well, let's call old Oliver, Oliver the First, and little Oliver, Oliver the Second."

"Yes, yes," she said eagerly.

"Well, then, if Oliver the First, who is the nephew of Oliver the Second, becomes Oliver the Second's uncle by marrying Oliver the Second's aunt, then Oliver the First becomes his own mother's uncle, as well as his own great-uncle and great-nephew to himself; and as his mother is his niece, he is his grandmother's brother, and as he is both his uncle's uncle and his nephew's uncle, his uncle is plainly his nephew's brother, and this uncle is therefore the son of his own sister (which is rank incest), while his mother becomes his grandmother, and as——"

"For Heaven's sake, stop a moment!" Miss Blossom cried.

I did so, and she sprinkled her forehead with eau-de-Cologne.

Why she could not have waited to do so till she was in her own boudoir, I could not understand, but ladies will be ladies.

"Where was I?" I said, a little nettled, for it is so easy to lose the thread of the most babyish argument when you are dealing with the weaker-headed sex.

"Never mind, go on to Oliver the Second," Miss Blossom murmured.

I smiled in triumph. Her spirit was crushed, her conscience weakened. The enormity of what she had been about to do in pure lightheartedness was coming home to her.

"Well, it's worse with Oliver the Second," I said. "Because if Oliver the First becomes his uncle, and he is already the uncle of Oliver the First, then he becomes the son of his own great-grandfather at a bound, thus annihilating two generations—his grandfather and his father, for whose disappearance you are responsible in justice if not in law; and, further, by suppressing his father you make him illegitimate at one stroke, by which shameful act you not only make a pariah of him for life, but exclude him from the succession to the Somerville estate, which thus escheats to the Crown; furthermore, as Oliver the First——"

Miss Blossom uttered a groan and swayed helplessly forward. I caught her in my arms. Somebody knocked at the door, and came in without waiting for an answer. It was Oliver Green. We looked at each other.

"She has fainted," I said. The information gave him no concern. He made no effort to relieve me of the burden.

"How came you here?" he said. "And what have you been doing to her?"

"Through the door," I said curtly. "And telling her she mustn't marry you."

"Why not?"

"Because you are a Bachelor. Also because the marriage would be so mixed. She got a little mixed herself in following my line of thought."

"What do you mean by a mixed marriage?"

He glared at me as if ready to pounce upon me. I glared back at him across the lady from India. I held her to my breast like a shield. With her head pillowed on my shoulder I felt a sweet sense of security from all pugilistic ills.

> O woman, in our hours of ease,
> Uncertain, coy, and hard to please ;
> When anger threats to wring the nose,
> Thou guardest us from bullies' blows.

Oliver and I had split many a soda together in effusive amity, little dreaming of the day when a woman would come between us.

" What do you mean by mixed ?" Oliver repeated with stern white lips.

I was about to relate afresh the catalogue of family complications. Suddenly a new solution made my heart thump like a steam-hammer cracking a nut.

"You cannot marry your uncle's aunt," I said. "You 're collaterally consanguineous."

Oliver staggered back. His jaw fell.

"It 's a lie !" cried Miss Blossom, extricating herself from my arms.

" It 's the truth," I said, shifting my position to the other side of the table. " If you, Miss Blossom, are Oliver the Second's aunt, then you cannot avoid being related to Oliver the Second's nephew in the line of direct descent. It 's a collateral anti-connubial consanguinity of the third degree, and unless it 's of the fourth degree according to Roman law, you and Oliver the First cannot marry. By Oliver the First, I mean you," I explained to Green.

" I don't care," Oliver the First answered. " We shall see what the authorities will say."

" Archbishop Parker's *Table of Kindred and Affinity*, according to Leviticus, and the Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical of 1603, distinctly say——"

"And I distinctly say that there 's the door."

"But will you imperil your position thus, Miss Blossom?" I pleaded. "Will you risk your marriage being null and void?"

Having said this, I picked myself up from the Hamanegg Terrace, bought some arnica, and lodged a protest with the officiating clergyman, stating that the bride was the bridegroom's great-aunt. Yet, two days after, Oliver the First married his uncle's aunt, and his uncle was the worst boy at the wedding. Oliver the Second actually made faces at the pew-opener. I wondered his nephew—I mean his uncle—did not give him away. I was in church, for my sympathy was not entirely extinguished by the careless manner in which I had been treated. Julia Blossom did not live up to her name even on her wedding-day, despite the tulle and the jasmine. She remained a prosaic cauliflower to the last. India was chosen for the honeymoon. The wedding-party drove straight to the station. It consisted of Oliver Green, Julia Green, their little nephew, and the native nurse. I was anxious to see the last of the detestable quartette, and was on the platform. To my surprise, the ayah and Oliver the Second were transferred to the care of an unknown lady. In a flash I saw through the whole idea. Oliver the First was determined to carry the comedy through to the bitter end. From the unknown lady—after the train was gone—I learnt that Julia Blossom was one of the greatest heiresses of Bombay. It was clear that nothing less would satisfy my poor friend than to *return from India* not only an uncle, but a wealthy uncle. Thus, and only thus, would the reversal be complete, and the sting of ridicule be entirely extracted.

I went the next day to the clergyman to inquire why he had gone on with this forbidden marriage. What he told me quite compensated for the annoyance I had experienced.

"Almost on your heels," he said, "the late Miss Blossom called to see me. She said there was an idea about that she was related to her intended husband, but that this report was premature. Her husband, whom she called Oliver the First, believed that she was the aunt of his uncle, whom she entitled Oliver the Second. 'But this,' said she, and proved it by documents, 'is a very natural false impression. *I am not Oliver the Second's aunt at all.* I *am* related to him, but in a relationship not yet recognised in law. The fact is, Oliver the Second's father, before he became Oliver the Second's mother's husband, asked *me* to be his wife. I said I could never think of him in that way but I would be a sister to him. So it was settled; I became his sister by refusal of marriage, and thus in due course I became Oliver the Second's aunt by refusal of marriage. So you see, my relationship to Oliver the First's parental stock was a purely moral and never a legal one. I often stayed at the house of my sister-in-law by refusal of marriage, and when she died she commended Oliver the Second to my care with her dying breath, her husband doing ditto last year with his.' The explanation was quite satisfactory, and as the poor lady seemed quite distracted by the idea of the marriage being delayed even by a day, I made no unnecessary difficulties."

Thus the clergyman to my sardonic satisfaction.

I saw it all now. The infatuated woman had traded upon her supposed relationship to Oliver the Second to bring Oliver the First to her feet. It was she who had put the matrimonial idea into his head, and goaded him on by sending that paragraph to the *Porcupine.* My collateral consanguineous discovery had threatened to upset her amorous structure, and the woman who had become morally related to Oliver the Second by refusal of marriage, bade fair to be debarred from legal relationship by the same cause. But she had outmanœuvred me.

I hugged the revenge which had fallen into my hands to my bosom, and kept it warm.

* * * * *

When Oliver Green, turned yellow, came back from India, I was on the landing-stage to meet him, and I had the satisfaction of informing him that he had wasted a liver complaint, and that the little seven-year-old fellow who climbed up his white flannel trousers to kiss him was his uncle still.

CHAPTER X.

MARRYING FOR MONEY.

HALFWAY up Mont Blanc two amateur mountaineers nearly came to blows with their alpenstocks. The guides' conception of the essential insanity of the English nature was strengthened. The necessity of attending to the ascent interfered at points with the amenities of the dialogue, but they set in severely and steadily during the halt at the next châlet. It was not the condition of Europe or of the mountain that made the travellers' angry passions rise; they were not contradicting each other on the rate at which they observed the glaciers moving, nor were they arguing whether it was the duty of the Canton Council to pave the crevasses. The point in dispute was financial; and Moses Fitz-Williams, as Treasurer of the Bachelors' Club, or Solicitor to the Treasury (as some of us facetiously styled the briefless barrister), evidently considered that his word was law. His disputant had even more self-respect. Tompas was neither a Bachelor nor a bachelor, but of the common or domestic variety of man. He had a wife and a villa at Camberwell, and four children called him papa. He was one of the myriad metropolitan taxpayers who are "something in the City," but nothing anywhere else. His life was as moral as a copybook. In politics the *Standard* agreed with him, and in religion he belonged to the Sunday-school—the great sect which keeps its six days sacred to business. Once a year Tompas's wife and family went to the seaside; Tompas went with them or to the Continent alternately. Such men as Tompas are Britannia's Bulwarks. Their heads are the real wooden walls of Old England. As a confirmed family-man, Tompas looked down on single men, deeming their views on any subject beneath discussion. Bachelors had not imbedded themselves in the great framework of society, and their conclusions were vitiated by their aloofness from reality. Tompas spoke as if marriage were a furnisher or furbisher of intellect, and as if King Solomon had purchased his pre-eminence in wisdom by taking a quantity of it. The financial question between him and Moses Fitz-Williams having reference to matters domestic, Tompas's conversation naturally confined itself mainly to the reduplicated form of "Pooh"; while Moses bleated "Bah," like a cynical ram. Tompas told Moses quite frankly that the Treasurer of the Bachelors' Club was an ass; and the lawyer spoke his mind quite freely in reply, not even charging six and eightpence for the information that Tompas was a nincompoop. Throughout Tompas endeavoured to shrivel up Fitz-Williams with the lightning of his glance, himself exposed the while to a cross fire from Moses's inharmonious eyes.

All the pother arose from the Barrister's official position in the Bachelors' Club. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, Moses was preparing a paper for the next General Court upon "The Financial Aspects of Marriage." In this paper he intended to show how much money was annually wasted by people getting married. He had calculated the sums dissipated by the inhabitants of the United Kingdom, and was ready to prove that if they had not entered it, they would have amassed sufficient to pay off the National Debt and unshackle the country. The minimum on which a man could marry was laid down by Fitz-Williams at five hundred a year; and he had investigated the whole literature of this evergreen subject in proof of his contention. There were to be other statistics in the Treasurer's paper, which, he did not conceal, bade fair to be a classical contribution to the economics of marriage. Not even from a casual co-climber like Tompas did his singularly candid nature make any effort to conceal this probability. But Tompas had a cantankerous carping disposition. Even though they were passing a nasty hole when Moses broached the subject, Tompas did not fall in with him, but made careless and violent gestures of disapproval of his estimates. It was sad that these two travellers could not learn from the Peace of Nature to be kind to each other. Overhead the sky shimmered lazily, as if it were painted on canvas, and had no work to do; above them was pillowed tranquilly the furrowed forehead of the mountain with its big bald head unpecked even by the eagle; at their feet the crevasses yawned sleepily. Alas! that man alone should mar the gneiss prospect! Tompas maintained obstinately that three hundred pounds a year was an ample income for a family man while five hundred pounds—Moses's matrimonial minimum—was enough to enable him, arithmetically not morally speaking, to support two wives and families. When the speculative financiers arrived at the top of Mont Blanc they quite forgot to look at the view. The wrangle continued down hill. Tompas was going on to

Rome and Moses to Rouen, but they altered their routes now so as to enjoy each other's society. Tompas wanted badly to go to Rome, and Moses had set his heart on Rouen ; but, as neither could sacrifice his own convenience to his companion's, they agreed to travel together to Berlin so as to thresh out this thing thoroughly. At an early stage of the duel Tompas had called in a second. He took it from his pocket-book. It was a slip of crumbling newspaper. This he unfolded lovingly and tenderly as one unwraps the face of an ancestral mummy, and, holding it firmly in his hand, he bade Fitz-Williams gaze upon it.

It was an old newspaper-cutting containing a table showing how a man with four children could live on two hundred and fifty pounds a year. The table was stated to be an extract from a recent book on *How to Live on Anything a Year*. In a short review of this book, the newspaper said that it was one of the ablest financial achievements of the year ; that starting from nothing a year it gradually worked its way up to a ducal income, like a self-made millionaire. The titles of the chapters were—" How to Live on Nothing a Year," " How to Live on a Sovereign a Year," " How to Live on Ten Pounds a Year," and so on in an ascending scale. The tables were spread with equal hospitality for the rich and the poor. But the two hundred and fifty pounder had been selected for quotation by the critic as the most generally interesting to its readers.

" That table, sir," said Tompas, " was my salvation." He had been cravenly sniffing about the suburbs of matrimony, disengaged to the sweetest girl God ever made, when he came across it.

" It was a wonderful piece of constructive finance, sir,"

ON THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS.

said Tompas, "broad and sweeping in conception, minute and detailed in execution. It was like an elephant's trunk, sir, which, as you may be aware, uproots an oak or picks up a pin. The computer had put down that pin; nor had he forgotten the oak in his furniture. The moment I clapped my eyes on this paper I was a married man. For, understand, the man of this table had only two hundred and fifty a year. *I* had three hundred! If he was so happy with his two-fifty, what joys would not be mine with three hundred, which was fifty to the good!"

"To the bad, sir, to the bad," asseverated Moses solemnly, looking earnestly to the right and the left simultaneously. "Your logic is out. Even if a man with two-fifty *can* marry, it is quite impossible for a man with three hundred to do so. For the bachelor with the smaller sum is *ex-hypothesi* accustomed to grub along, and so it does not matter whether he is married or single; but the man with the higher income being more exigent towards life is unable to sacrifice himself to the interests of posterity."

"You are joking," Tompas said.

"That is news to me," said Moses politely. "You are so dull that you fancy you see a joke when you are bowled over. It is the last resource of little minds. No, sir, it is no joke, but a serious fact that the poor marry most nowadays. The higher a man's income, the less he can afford to marry on it. This is a main position of my forthcoming paper. Your reasoning, sir, as to the two-fifty and the three hundred, involves a fallacy of simple inspection. It is on a par with the argumentation of the schoolboy who demonstrates, by crude rule of three, that if one man can do a piece of work in two days, two men can do it in one day. As a matter of fact, the two men will gossip or play nap, and the work will last four days."

"And with this silly wire-drawing you hope to impose on my common-sense."

"I have no such hope!"

"But confound it, sir, you must have, or you wouldn't talk such paradoxical drivel. It is an insult to my common-sense."

"I hope not, sir," said Moses with concern. "I never abuse the absent. How can any man of common-sense suppose that marriage could be undertaken on two-fifty or three hundred a year?"

"But d——n it, man," roared Tompas, "I *did* undertake it."

"Quite so. That is just my point, sir. If you had been a man of common-sense you would never have supposed it could be done."

"But my supposition was proved sound, sir," shrieked Tompas. "Have I not a wife and a family and fifty pounds to spare; all on two-fifty a year? For I regulate my expenses strictly according to this table, sir," he said, rapping it reverently. "We live in clover on two-fifty a year. We have not a single want ungratified—such was the genius of our unknown benefactor whom my little ones daily remember in their prayers. We are happy as the day is long. With the extra fifty we are enabled to purchase all those luxuries which are necessary to persons in our station—including a summer's holiday." Tompas ceased, but kept his look of conscious rectitude. He belonged to that class of persons who make a virtue out of the most unpromising materials.

"And so you and that sweet girl married on the strength of this computation?" said Moses huskily.

"Yes," replied Tompas, "though I was just a day late in getting the original sweet girl I mentioned before. If that book had only been reviewed a day earlier I should have been a different husband. She got engaged an hour before the notice appeared. But being then wrought up to marrying point, I asked another. And let me tell you, sir, I have never regretted it. I have lived in comfort, and brought up my children to be creditable citizens in the twentieth century, and all on an income which you, with your unpractical theories, declare to be utterly inadequate. Now, sir, what have you to say to that?"

"I say that what you have done is impossible, and I will prove it. You say you have gone exactly by that table. Now that table is the most ridiculous collocation of haphazard figures ever jumbled together!"

"But, sir, I have thriven by it. I have tested it. That 's trumps."

Moses calmly swept off the trick.

"I drew it up."

"You? Nonsense!" said Tompas.

"You agree with me already," observed Moses sweetly. "Yes; I started life as a bookmaker you know, for I only ate my dinners in the Inner Temple to get into journalism. I had nothing to live upon. I had to answer the problem 'How to get on in life?' I wrote a book informing other people 'How to get on in life.' It did not succeed, and I had to try another way. There was a temporary rage for household accounts. I fell in with a publisher who gave me ten pounds to write the encheiridion that has guided your life. I was a young unattached scapegrace, living in taverns and restaurants. My ideas of expense were as hazy as an heiress's. I had never lived much at home, and so had rarely been present at the domestic squabbles over expenses; as for babies, I had but scant recollection of the expenses of my own equipment in life. Imagine, therefore, the hash these calculations must have been. And how, if you had really taken a leaf out of my book, could you have managed to escape ruin? Marriage must, indeed, be a failure, financially speaking, when run on the basis I recommended in my inept handbook. No; model your etiquette on my 'Guide by a Member of the Aristocracy' if you will; ride the high horse on my 'Principles of Equitation' if you like; and prognosticate your future life by my 'Vaticination for the Household, or the Inoculation of Truth by Dreams,' if such be your humour; but do not, oh do not attempt to pilot the vessel of matrimony by the chart I drew up in my youth and turpitude."

"Out of the mouth of fools and sucklings cometh forth Wisdom," said Tompas sententiously. "You are wiser than you calculate. If you really are the inventor of these invaluable calculations, I long to be better versed in them. I only know the table I married on."

"Do you mean to say that you never bought the book?"

"How could I? I married immediately, and the expense of purchasing it was not allowed for in the estimate. So I have always felt an unappeased curiosity to know 'how to live on nothing a year.'"

"You will learn that secret from Thackeray and his Becky Sharp. A shorter way is to write the honest truth about any public man."

"How do you mean?"

"You will be sent to prison for inditing a false and malicious libel. If you play your cards well you will be a first-class misdemeanant. I have taken a first-class in journalism myself. It was the making of me."

Tompas looked suspicious.

"And how can you live on a sovereign a year?"

"By marrying her daughter."

"Oh, don't be so absurd!" cried Tompas pettishly.

"Reassure yourself. I have no such intention. But don't you go away with the idea that you have achieved the impossible. You have read Balzac's *Physiologie du mariage* of course?"

"No, sir," said Tompas hotly. "I never read French books."

"Oh, I forgot. There is no translation. I beg your pardon. Well, anyhow, in this book you will find that Balzac excludes the greater portion of womankind from the connotation of the term *Femme.* He sifts the fine flour from the bran, and finds that for the purposes of romantic love only one woman in fifteen is a woman."

"Don't talk to me of love, sir. I am a married man."

"Have patience. I was leaving love and coming to marriage. In the same way as Balzac refused to call most women women, I refuse to call most marriages marriages. Certainly yours was no marriage."

"Sir!"

"Only in a platonic sense, of course, it was no marriage. A union in which beggarly economies are the order of the day is no marriage. It is but book-keeping by double entry. The wedded spirit, sir, must expatiate at large in the atmosphere of art and luxury. To make both ends meet is a tawdry occupation for immortal souls. I account no marriage such in the higher sense, which is contracted on less than five hundred. Your defence of half that amount, sir, is a disgraceful retrogression to lower ideals. Why, sir, a hundred and fifty years ago some anonymous philanthropist, an ancestor in the spirit to M'Gullicuddy" (the speaker bared his head reverently as he spoke the President's name) "published a broad-sheet entitled *Forewarn'd, Fore-arm'd; or the Batchelors' Monitor: Being a Modest Estimate of the Expenses attending the Married Life.* And even in those primitive times, when luxury had not attained a tithe of its present stature, a decent marriage was valued as an annual charge of £594. So well was this acknowledged, alike by friends and foes of the holy estate, that even the Counterblast to it, which appeared in the same year under the name of *The Ladies' Advocate; or an Apology for Matrimony,* did not attempt to eschew this liability, but only essayed to prove that whereas the first author had appraised the 'expenses' of the Bachelor life at £87, they would really be £238, so that the *additional* cost of matrimony would only be £356. A sum, mark you, sir, in excess of *your* entire allowance. Nay more!"

Moses paused impressively, and drew out a note-book in which he had jotted down miscellaneous materials for his great effort, and continued:—

"The author of the monition to Bachelors says that his estimate 'supposes that the marry'd man actually receives £2000 with his first wife; and has, in the Compass of Fifteen Years Eight Children, Four of which die, and Four only are alive at one time.' £2000, sir, to start on, besides a moderate allowance of children, and then £594 a year! I wish I had the allegorical tableau here, sir, which accompanied this profound calculation, and demonstrated the cheapness of celibacy through the medium of figures, with or without clothes or wings. I wish I could show you the feeble pictorial reply in which Cupids with hymeneal torches vainly endeavoured to confute the original figures."

"If there be such a pamphlet it is transparently absurd. One hundred and fifty years ago the purchasing power of £594 was much greater than now; and besides, as you rightly observe, there were not so many solicitations to expenditure. Who can take up the colossal catalogue of any self-respecting Store without feeling that our facilities for spending money have kept pace with our improved methods of making it?"

"Which strengthens my argument. If £594 was the minimum for elegant living in 1741, this should be double as much now. In fixing it at £500 I have yielded unduly to the contentions of the superficial. The Bachelor minimum I take to be £200. Even the *Ladies' Advocate* could not make it more than £238, though he made his Bachelor a paragon of extravagance, and made him spend no less than £5 a year upon Brushes, Brooms, Mops, and Turners' and Chandlers' Articles. But, sir, judge of the weakness of the case of the *Ladies' Advocate* when he cants to the jury of marriage as 'the Law of Heaven and the Land, the Purpose of Life, the End of Nature, a Debt to the Commonwealth and to Posterity, and *a Justification of One's Own Parents*?' The *Batchelors' Monitor* keeps a far higher level of debate, never descending to ethical considerations. He falls short of the mark rather than overshoots it, for he assumes far too much moderation in the expenditure of the household. Imagine that

Essences, Powder, Hungary and Lavender water, Elder Flowers, Pomatums, Washes, Snuff, etc., only come to £3 a year! Or that the Christmas Donations of Paterfamilias are only £3 heavier than those of the Bachelor! And what do you say to the generosity of a Controversialist who expressly leaves out of account the following 'Probable Expenses' (probable, save the mark !) ? 'Country House or Lodgings; perhaps journeys to Bath, Tunbridge, Scarborough; Chaise and Pair, or one Horse; possibly Saddle-Horse for little Excursions, Riding Habits, etc.; Card-playing, an amusement that has banished the Needle and many useful Employments out of the Modern Education for Ladies; Presents as Watch and Equipage, Jewels, Rings, etc. Perhaps Lap-Dogs, Parrots, Canary Birds, etc.!' To-day wives don't tell their husbands to go to Bath, they want them to go much further. Our half-hearted *Monitor* also admittedly says 'nothing of the Chance of Extravagance and other too common Incidents which we forbear to mention out of *Tenderness* to the Ladies?' Tenderness to the ladies, forsooth! What has a scientific economist to do with Tenderness—or even with Ladies?"

"He is dry as dust enough by now," observed Tompas with satisfaction. "The ignorant incompetent idiot! If he said a man couldn't marry on less than £594 a year, he was either a liar or an ignoramus."

"He knew more about domestic economy than you. Can you tell me what your babies cost you a year?"

"Do you think I post up my babies separately?"

"Of course not," said Moses contemptuously. "You must go to a Bachelor to know the cost of a baby. Lookers-on always see most of the game. Our glorious Pioneer, the warning beacon-fire that saved so many lives from social wreckage, was a specialist in babies, perhaps the most technical and mysterious branch of domestic economy. He compiled the immortal '*Baby Catalogue* for Eight children of a year old or under, often recruited, and Numbers of most of the Particulars.' Do you know, sir, what a baby involves? In 1741, sir (and it probably involves twice as much now), it involved 'Child-bed basket, and Pin-cushion, and Pins, and Chimney-line; fine Satten Mantle and Sleeves for the Christening, Cradle and its Furniture, Biggins, Head-bands, Caps, Short-Stays, Long-Stays, Shirts, Wastecoats, Clouts, Beds, Blankets, Rollers, Mantles, Sleeves, Neck-cloths, Shoes, Stockens, Coats, Stays, Frocks, Bibs, Quarter-Caps laced, Coral, Ribbands, Cap and Feather, Cloak, First Coat and Second, Dozens for the Nurse, Anodyne Necklace, etc.' And how much, Mr. Tompas, do you think this cost a year?"

"A hundred pounds!" replied Tompas faintly.

"Ten guineas! Did I not say he handicapped himself too much? And yet he won hands down."

Tompas was overwhelmed by this voice from the dead—this cry from the cradle of an earlier civilisation. Though a father himself, his heart was not petrified, and as his eye conjured up that ancient baby-face swathed in biggins, he turned away and blew his nose. That day they wrangled no more.

Magnum fuit to tell the tale of their internecine campaign, or to chronicle their bickerings. On the way to Berlin Moses had occupied himself in carpentering a series of financial tables, which were to be henceforth indispensable additions to household furniture. They were intended to supersede his former jejune attempts. This time he laid down the chart of expense on the basis of observation and from practical experience of the reefs and shoals, instead of evolving it from his inner unconsciousness. Tompas was the first to have sight of The New Finance, for the initial expenses in the necessarily interminable series were made manifest to him in Berlin, in a beer-garden. He perused Fitz-Williams's formulæ with gathering bewilderment, but with the air of superiority which he would have preserved even in the presence of Fluxions.

Tompas would have sat on the Canonical Forms themselves, if they had been fashioned by a friend of his. The New Finance ran as follows :—

HOW TO LIVE ON

Annual Income	£80			£100			£150			£200			£250			£500			£750			£1000		
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
Rent and Taxes,	25	0	0	−80	0	0	60	0	0		..		30	0	0	70	0	0	100	0	0	250	0	0
Court-Plaster and Flowers,	3	0	0		..		102	0	0		..		10	0	0		..		7	10	0	20	0	0
Wife,		..			..			..			..			..		50	0	0	25	0	0	1	17	6
Crape, Tomb-stones, etc.,		..			..		5	0	0		..			..		3	0	0	6	0	0	18	0	0
Children,		..			..			..			..			..		100	0	0	150	0	0	200	0	0
Meat and Walking-sticks,	10	0	0	10	0	0	12	0	0		..		5	0	0	30	0	0	80	0	0	100	0	0
Water,		..			..			..			..			..		4	0	0	7	0	0	9	0	0
Whisky,	8	0	0	5	0	0		..			..			..		1	0	0	2	0	0		..	
Omnibuses and Railways,		..		4	0	0	5	0	0		..		10	0	0	20	0	0	50	0	0	75	0	0
Hansoms and Tooth-powder,	10	0	0	8	0	0	8	0	0		..		15	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Tailors,	80	0	0	60	0	0		..			..		50	0	0	30	0	0	40	0	0	200	0	0
Epic of Hades, Half-Calf,		..			..		0	0	1		..		0	10	6		..			..			..	
Charity,	5	0	0	4	0	0	3	0	0		..			..		5	0	0	4	0	0	3	3	0
Dinner-Parties,		..			..			..			..			..		10	0	0	30	0	0	200	0	0
Stationery, Sealing-wax, etc.,	15	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0		..		8	0	0		..			..			..	
Furniture,		..			..			..			..		300	0	0		..			..		150	0	0
Boat-race Ribbons,	0	2	6	0	0	2½	0	5	0		..			..			..			..			..	
Automatic Chocolates, etc.,		..			..		15	0	0		..		5	0	0	5	0	0	10	0	0		..	
Theatres,		..			..		5000	0	0		..		52	10	0		..			..			..	
Tobacco,	5	0	0	5	0	0	10	0	0		..		2	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0		..	
Servants,		..			..			..			..			..		14	0	0	28	0	0	100	0	0
Actresses' Portraits,	5	0	0	2	0	0	50	0	0		..			..		1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Dentists and Nut-crackers,		..			..		6	0	0		..		3	0	0	2	0	0	3	0	0	7	0	0
Trouser-stretchers, Corkscrews, and Boot-trees,	2	0	0	1	0	0		..			..		5	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	6	0	2	6
Flutes,	0	10	0		..			..			..			..			..			..			..	
Liquorice,		..			..			..			..			..		37	0	0		..			..	
Damages for Breach of Promise,	50	0	0	10	0	0	0	0	0¼	200	0	0		..			..			..			..	
Mouse-traps and Miscellanea,	4	5	5	100	7	2	25	16	0	0	0	0¼	9	3	0½	400	0	0	332	7	0	0	6	8¾
Total Annual Expenditure,	222	17	11	131	7	4½	5304	1	1¼	200	0	0¼	505	3	6½	784	0	6	877	17	6	1336	9	8¾
Total Annual Income,	80	0	0	100	0	0	150	0	0	200	0	0	250	0	0	500	0	0	750	0	0	1000	0	0
Total Annual Saving,	142	17	11	31	7	4½	5154	1	1¼	0	0	0¼	255	3	6½	284	0	6	127	17	6	336	9	8¾

"Well, what do you think of them?" said Moses jauntily, as Tompas silently let the paper droop. "Will they do?"

"Instead of the certificate of two doctors. Sir, you are stark, staring mad."

"Hurrah!" shouted Moses, "now I know I have made a great discovery." He ordered some more lager in his exultation. "Drink," said he, "to the New Napier and the New Finance. What are logarithms to my batch of budgets!"

"Budgets? They are simply numbers scattered from a lotto-bag."

"Aha! I thought you did not understand the inner and interconnected beauties of this architectonic arithmetical achievement. There is nothing attenuated, naught set down in malice. Every number bristles with significance, every line is pregnant with meaning. It is not only a triumph of inductive reasoning and a lesson in finance, it is full of sermons on the text of numbers. If you knew how to pull the strings the figures would work out; the sweepings of the lotto-bag would become kaleidoscopic figures if your eye brought the needed symmetry. The——"

The lager beer arrived, and as Tompas was fond of lager beer, he drank to the New Napier, and, a little mollified thereby, asked for an explanation.

"As well ask for an explanation of the Universe. Tell me one item you do not understand."

"How can a man spend £222, 17s. 11d. when he has only an income of £80, and——"

"My table is empirical. It is a real table—a real live table—none of your moonshiny, airy, unpractical *à priori* theories, such as you have lived by all these years."

"But effect a saving?"

"Empiricism again. Isn't it obvious that if a man spends £222, 17s. 11d., and has only £80, he *must* save £142, 17s. 11d.? If he had had it, wouldn't he have spent it? You admit that. Very well, then. But he *didn't* spend it. Therefore he saved it. That is the value of my system. It teaches the *un*economical to save. The ordinary tables address themselves to the frugal and the thrifty, who don't require teaching. Anything else?"

"But how can your £200 man spend nothing?"

"How can you say that when he pays £200 damages annually? He is a collector, and like all collectors spends his entire fortune on his pet fad. He has the greatest collection of *fiancées* in the kingdom. True, he abstains from meat, rent, flutes, tooth-powder, and other more conventional luxuries, but that is because he is a vegetarian, a care-taker, a teetotaller, and, since he lives opposite a cigar-shop, an anti-tobacconist."

"But has he left off clothes, too?"

"Yes, he has left-off clothes given him."

"But what—what does he spend that farthing on? Mouse-traps?"

"He does not spend it. He drops it down a hole. The law of averages requires that every man shall lose at least a farthing once a year. Your ordinary Utopian table coolly passes over this item."

"Well, perhaps you will explain the vagaries of your £250 man. Why should he spend £300 on furniture?"

"Blind! blind!" muttered Moses pityingly. "Do you not see that he has ceased to purchase actresses' portraits, that he spends £10 on flowers and court-plaster, that he is extravagant in dress, that he wastes

£8 in writing letters, and purchases inordinate chocolates. Man, man, were you not yourself engaged once? On my system a man may betroth himself at 250, as is plainly written in the tables, though he may not marry before 500."

"Rather old, isn't it?" queried Tompas, with a sickly smile. But he was not to be crushed so easily.

"But why should the £300 man spend £37 on liquorice? That at least is inexplicable."

"You forget," replied Moses, with a sweet smile, "that he is a sweet-stuff dealer."

"But you can't mix that up with his domestic expenses."

"Why blame me? He deceives his wife that way. It is not for the scientific observer to praise or blame him; it is his duty simply to record the facts."

"Hum! But if I understand your symbols, the hundred-pounder saves £80 a year by paying his rent and taxes. A pretty paradox, forsooth!"

"A sober fact! The rent of chambers in the central district is so extortionate that he is compelled to rent a whole house in the district. He pays £100 for the house, lets himself extensive chambers for £120, and the rest of the house for £60, and thus effects a sheer saving of £80 per annum."

Tompas was so obfuscated that he flew to the other extreme to cover his confusion.

"But what of the man who, blessed with a thousand a year, allows his wife a scurvy £1, 17s. 6d.?"

"Really, Tompas, one would think you were born yesterday. As if a man with a thousand a year would marry a wife without an income of her own! The more man has the more he wants. That £1, 17s. 6d. is simply the two-guinea present he gives his wife on her birthday—trade price."

"But do you mean to say such a man spends nothing on whisky?"

"Yes, he has only fine wines."

"But you don't mention wines?"

"They're included in the Miscellanea."

"And he gives dinners without cheese?"

"That's in the Mouse-traps."

"And without cigars? I see so much—that he is all show. But surely he must give his friends cigars."

"He does—out of the boxes they have given him. A man blessed with a thousand a year and a number of poor friends never need buy cigars."

"But surely he would not spend £250 on rent and taxes?"

"He spends only £100 in rent. The rest goes in taxes—especially Income Tax. The assessors happen to be friends of his, so, as you have acutely noticed, he has to make a good show. No man likes to be underrated—by his friends."

"Well, there is something in that," replied Tompas, with more respect for the table than he had yet shown. "And your eighty-pounder seems to me to act very naturally."

"Ah," said Moses with satisfaction, "you are beginning to enter into the spirit of the calculation."

"But why does he spend £15 on correspondence?"

"How else could a man save £142, 17s. 11d. a year? He has so many promises to pay to write to his creditors, so many appeals for loans to make to his friends and relatives."

"But the moment a man gets £500 a year he ceases to write letters?"

"You are hopeless. He writes them from his Club."

Tompas began to look dead-beat. "But your third column! Nothing on tailors, £15 on chocolate, £50 on actresses' portraits! The creature is utterly unreasonable."

"Of course. It is a woman."

"A woman?"

"Yes, why should you imagine it was a man? The usual masculine assumption that the earth is man's and the tables thereof. Why, everything points to the sex."

"But she must dress?"

"Of course she must, but she goes to a dressmaker, not a tailor. I should have thought the outlay of £25 on Mouse-traps, etc., would have opened the eyes of the blindest. And who but the most myopic could miss the point of the ¼d. breach of promise damages? What *man* ever gets let off with a farthing?"

"Granted. But how can a half-calf edition of the Epic of Hades be got for 1d.?"

"Good heavens, Tompas! you don't mean to say you don't understand that! She has a guinea subscription at Mudie's, and the penny represents the proportional cost of reading this book. No one buys books in England now, except the two-fifty pounder, who purchases the poem as a present to his sweetheart. Don't you see that he has also got to spend lots on the theatre, while all the others can afford to wait till the 'gigantic successes' come along, and the orders are flowing freely?"

"*All* the others—when No. 3 spends £5000 on theatres!"

"Oh, that is another story. She spends it partly as lessee, partly on her salary as *tragédienne* at leading theatres."

"But how in the d——l can it be done on £150 a year?"

"Gently, sir!" said Moses reproachfully. "Remember you are speaking of a lady."

Tompas apologised instantly, but still ventured to point out that an actress would be the last person in the world to waste £50 a year on actresses' portraits.

"Most moderate, sir," Moses rejoined suavely. "Many actresses spend much more than that on their portraits. Think of the infinite poses, postures, dresses, and faces an actress has to be taken in. The £102 for court plaster and flowers are of course to cover the cost of the bouquets thrown on the stage. All I have told you, sir, is not a tithe of the manifold meanings and beauties of this table. Alps rise beyond Alps in a perspective of boundless glory. The pickaxes of science would be years mining in their bowels. The ordinary calculations are so elaborately useless. They go wrong with such logical precision. Real life laughs them to scorn. Your table allows you, say, a sovereign for a dog, and seven and six for his licence; it does not warn you that that dog will go biting the legs of the legal-minded. Beware of that dog! Your table permits you to spend five pounds on a midsummer holiday at the seaside, and works it out to a farthing, but it meanly omits to state that you will want sand-shoes, that your hat will be blown over the pier, that you will lose the return-half of your ticket, and that a female cousin will be staying down there who will expect to be seasick at your expense. So, more lager, waiter; let us drink again to The New Finance and the New Napier."

They drank so often to them that they almost came to blows. They were still brawling and squabbling on the Channel steamer, and they had no sooner set foot in London than they called upon me and told me the whole story and asked me to arbitrate. Tompas argued that a man could marry on two-fifty, much more on three hundred, and proved it by his life. Fitz-Williams argued that a man could not marry even on the higher amount, and proved it by his tables. After abysmally deep reflection I said there was only one way for me to decide between them. If I consented to put up for a week at Tompas's villa in Camberwell, and to watch his expenditure carefully, I could settle this thing once for all. Any week taken at random would do. *Ex pede Herculem.* From that I could gauge whether he was really living on three hundred pounds or not. Tompas was so cocksure of himself that he assented eagerly, and after some reluctance I agreed to put up with the old bore for the ensuing week. It was an ideal week for me, for I learned a great deal, and though Mrs. Tompas received me affably and boarded me well, the language I overheard her use to her husband about me in their bedroom was libellous, and the names she called him bordered on scurrility. At the end of the week the three of us assembled in the Bachelors' Club and I gave my decision. It was in favour of Moses Fitz-Williams. Tompas swore—that I was prejudiced. But I proved conclusively that the household expenses for the week argued an annual outlay of nearly four hundred. I said that he consumed a frightful amount of gas, and kept a table far in advance of his income. The wine alone which he had supplied to me at dinner would run away with eighty a year. Tompas bridled up, and said you could not treat a visitor like your own family, and besides my expenses must be deducted from the calculation. This I could not allow, and Moses explained violently that this was just one of the contingencies which the stock tables did not foresee, and which real life was fond of springing upon a man. If a man with three hundred a year had to entertain another man for a week, just to show that he only spent three hundred a year, he must provide for this expense out of his three hundred. Tompas shrieked "No!" I said it was a difficult casuistical question, but that all the best Jesuits and Talmudists were dead, and it would probably never be settled now. M'Gullicuddy had to interfere to disentangle the disputants.

Next day Moses wired for me. I went to his rooms. They were luxurious. There were flowers in vases, and court-plaster on his face. "More than I allowed for!" he said, groaning.

"Paul," he said, when I had lit one of his cigars, "there is only one way out of this."

"Yes?" I said, my heart beating ominously. "What is it?"

"You must marry."

My heart stood still. "I?" I gasped.

"Yes, you. I want to show that a man cannot marry on three hundred a year. A man in whose integrity both parties can rely must be the object of the experiment. Now you have more than that, I believe; but if you just sequestrate three hundred for this purpose, and come a cropper in the Bankruptcy Court, my thesis will be demonstrated to an unbelieving Tompas."

"But why should I marry to support *you*?"

"Paul, I know it is a great sacrifice I am asking, and but for the depth of our friendship I would never dare to ask it. But we are speaking now soul to soul. You are the only friend I have in the world. *I* cannot marry because I am an honorary official of the Bachelors' Club. *You* are only a private member; the blow would fall gentlier on M'Gullicuddy. It is for *his* sake I ask it, my dear old Paul. You worship him no less than I. Besides, I have only the bare sum—just the three hundred a year. *I* cannot risk matrimony. True, I might be mistaken. The income *might* be adequate. But what if my marriage were a success? What if Tompas were refuted? I should be ruined. And I am certain that my marriage will *not* be a failure, and that I *shall* be ruined. Come, do not deny me this favour. Remember you agreed to arbitrate."

"Moses," I said sternly, "this is the one thing in the world no man has a right to ask of another. Ask him to sacrifice fame, fortune, limb—nay, life! but not his celibacy, Moses, not his celibacy! If I *am* arbitrator, I say it is *you* who should marry, not I."

"Well, if *you* think so, *as* arbitrator," said Moses readily, "I suppose I must. Do you know any one who would be suitable?"

"For the purposes of the experiment she must be an average woman," I said; "not too extravagant, and not too parsimonious. For the rest you must please yourself."

So Moses Fitz-Williams married, with the consent of Tompas and the curse of M'Gullicuddy. And he furnished his house on the hire system, so that the expense might be distributed evenly over a term of years. And he gave his wife whatever she asked of him, without stint, but without overplus. And at the end of the first year, one sweet September evening, I audited the accounts and drew up the balance-sheet, and gave my decision.

It was in favour of Tompas.

Moses swore—that I was prejudiced. He observed violently that the amount on the debit side must be colossal, that his wife and he had wallowed in luxury. It soon transpired that she was an heiress, who, wishing to be wooed for herself alone, had concealed the fact, and was paying three-quarters of the bills out of her privy purse. Poor creature! She will carry to the grave with her the delusion that Moses had married her for love. Wild horses will not tear it from her, nor is there any likelihood of their trying.

Tompas, with his Philistine mind, once hinted to me that Moses had known she was an heiress all along, but I knew that Moses's motives were as pure as the new-fallen snow, that he married merely for the experiment, and would have done nothing consciously to vitiate it. He fell a victim to his love of figures, and drew his assurance money with regret.

But fate was against a settlement, and he still argues the point with Tompas, and there is no M'Gullicuddy to disentangle them.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ORIGINAL SINNER.

TIME hung heavy on my hands now that the Bachelors' Club had almost melted away. I could not steel myself to sit for any length of time within those walls which had so often echoed with single-hearted laughter. Every sight brought back old memories. I could hardly look the steward in the face; nor rid myself of the feeling that Willoughby Jones spent his day in gloating. Determined as the remaining three of us were to run the Club, and remain single till death did us part, we yet rather shrank from meeting one another there. We had given up the hope of filling up the vacancies left by the miscreants whose names adorned the funereal fresco; the vacancies in men's crania needed filling up first. The only person who benefited by our losses was jolly little Mandeville Brown, for they so upset his mind that he published a volume of verse at his own expense. It was called *Poems of Pessimism.* I was never more surprised in my life than to find the sale spreading like wildfire. I suppose the title was so happy. Not being able to write poetry, I took to watching M'Gullicuddy from an unreasonable and insulting but irrepressible fear that HE might go and get married next. One fine October evening as we were walking together down Pimlico way in Indian file, he suddenly turned upon me and suggested in broad Doric that I should start a paper. I jumped at the sudden suggestion. He said that such talents as Heaven had blessed me with ought not to be wasted. In a moment I saw the idea. The new journalism had invented interviewing; but interviews were always so short—on paper. A "new" journal which interviewed the man of the week in each number, and in all the number, would hit the public between wind and water. No sooner conceived than begun. I registered the title of *At Home Every Monday,* and called upon Mandeville Brown, thanking the stars that had made an old friend famous just in time to be useful. I was determined to look after Number One well.

The Pessimist was practising a step-dance when I arrived, but he graciously desisted and flung himself upon an ottoman. A faint smell of attar of roses pervaded his artistic apartments, decorated with plaques, colour symphonies, busts of Schopenhauer and Leopardi, French comic papers, pendent guitars and violas, flowers, photographs from the nude, old porcelain, proof etchings, and favourable reviews of *Poems of Pessimism.*

"Then you wish to interview me about my *Poems of Pessimism,*" he said, lighting an aromatic Turkish cigarette, and leaving me to help myself.

"I do; I want to know what they mean."

"Have you not read them?"

"Yes; that is why I want to know. I do not speak for myself alone. They have made such a sensation, and sold so tremendously, that the public wants to know what they mean."

"My dear Paul, I cannot tell you. I have written the poems. It is for the commentators to provide a meaning for them."

"Well, at any rate the public wants to know what *you* mean."

"Ah! that is different. Here is your interview with me. Kindly let me see a proof."

He took out of his drawer a very bulky manuscript neatly typographed, and handed it to me.

I looked at him inquiringly.

"Don't you understand?" he said. "I have no time to be interviewed now that I am famous. While I was unknown I could have afforded numerous facilities to interviewers. They did not seize those opportunities. Foreseeing that my time would be valuable the moment fame came to me, I devoted some of my numerous hours of obscure leisure to interviewing myself. I never put off till to-morrow what I can do to-day, and I congratulate myself on the saving of time thus effected. The interview is divided into three parts. The first part is taken up with your impressions, the third with mine. In the second you will find full particulars of my ancestors, birth, training, early genius, rise and progress, trousers and times of writing, manners and income-tax, and my list of the best hundred books, pictures, and musical compositions. This part is extremely interesting. I cannot imagine anything more so, though *you* are at liberty to do so if you please. You have *carte blanche* to do with me as you will—make a new man of me, if you can. There is really no more reason for my taking up your time. You will find my remarks a good deal more artistically unpolished than if I had to formulate my ideas about everything, etc., impromptu. Good-bye, Paul. Wish you luck—and don't forget to send me a proof."

As soon as I was outside, I turned into a restaurant and feverishly opened the manuscript. I was extremely curious to know how he had impressed me. The manuscript was headed in capital letters

THE PRINCE OF PESSIMISTS.

MANDEVILLE BROWN INTERVIEWED.

I was glad to see that my impressions were completely creditable. My observations betokened a ready eye and a pungent pen. But as I feel some modesty in obtruding my own impressions upon the reader, I shall omit this portion of the interview, and reproduce only Part III.

* * * * *

"You have always been known as a Pessimist?"

"Yes; that is the worst of it. I can never enjoy myself without being called upon to explain that it is not that I am inconsistent, but that the inquirer is a fool."

"What is the formula of Pessimism?"

"That this is the best of all possible worlds."

"But that is the formula of Optimism!"

"I cannot help it. I do not believe that any better world than this is possible. That is the awful pity and pathos of it. Nothing is possible but what *is*."

"And what, then, is the formula of Optimism?"

"The badge of Optimism is the mourning-band; and its supreme expression pity for the dead."

"Your poems have a good deal to say about Fate."

"Fate willed it so."

"You don't believe in Free Will then?"

"No; we can do as we like, of course, but we can't like as we like. Free Will is refuted by figures. Kismet has been translated into mathematical curves. Life is an hereditary disease. It is transmitted from father to son. The persistent immigration of pauper infants must be checked, or one day there will be an epidemic of parenticide. At present every well-regulated homicidal mind shrinks from it. In China, when a man signalises himself they ennoble his ancestors; on the same principle, when a man commits a crime, we ought to punish his parents. That would put the brake on parentage. Every one can help being a parent: no one can help being a child."

"Then the criminal is——"

"The criminal's parent. If we studied the criminal instead of his comfort we should know this. The criminal is the legacy-duty we have to pay on the civilisation bequeathed to us. Crime is as hereditary as gout, insanity, or a seat in the House of Lords."

"Then you don't think 'life is serious after all,' as a popular dramatist hath it. You think it is a mistake."

"I combine both views. Life is a serious mistake."

"Is that why you are a Socialist?"

"Yes; why should we not divide the evil? But I am none the less an Individualist. I am as self-contradictory as Existence itself. It is intolerable that the fittest should survive; it is equally intolerable that we should have to be looked after by our neighbours."

"Then how would you describe yourself politically?"

"Like all reasonable men I am a Democrat with a profound distrust of the People. Politics is a see-saw. Conservatism creates Radicals by irritating the ill-to-do; Radicalism creates Conservatives by contenting them."

"Then Progress is a fiction?"

"Fortunately—yes. We never progress; we 'mark time,' and, because we have left the past behind us, think we are in advance of it. The Brotherhood of Man is a confidence trick. If War is to be killed, it will be only by the Gospel of Smokeless Powder *et hoc genus omne.* When the scarlet fever can no longer be cured by blood-letting, because we can't get at the enemy, the race will pride itself on its civilisation. No; Progress is fortunately impossible."

"But why fortunately? Why should you rejoice if the coming of justice on earth is impossible?"

"Because it would be so unjust. Why should some future generation be beastly comfortable, merely through coming late? It is a most disgusting ideal."

"It is the ideal of all Social Reformers, of all religions."

"If they realised what their ideal meant they would abandon it. Ideals are the result of weak visualisation. It is only by not defining your ideal that you get the strength to pursue it."

"But idealists are the salt of the earth, the saving remnant."

"Idealists are too heavenly for earth, and too earthly for heaven. They are like Mahomet's coffin—out of touch with either sphere. The one thing these unselfish dreamers will never understand is that unselfishness is a physical impossibility, that all human action must be in the middle voice of the Greeks—with reference to self. No more surely do we see the world through I-glasses than we do everything to please ourselves. Oh, if the idealists would only realise this, they would be at once better philanthropists and worse men. It is idealists who are responsible for the current panacea of Culture. The race will educate itself away. Self-culture is an unhealthy hothouse experiment, but it is not so mischievous as universal gardening. Oh, what terrible riddles the Modern Sphinx sets us,—none of the childish conundrums which Œdipus plumed himself on answering."

"But surely you would not return to the days when the vulgar could not read or write, and there was no Free Press to represent and mould their aspirations!"

"'Free Press!' O shade of Milton! Gagged by Mrs. Grundy and supported by advertisers. Your pill-vendor or soap-boiler regards himself as the patron saint of journalism. O the advertiser! He is the true king of our century. At every turn he sternly commands us to wash with his soap, smoke his tobacco, or intoxicate ourselves with his brandy. He would willingly purchase the sunset to paint on the clouds the name of his nostrum. He would have liked to contract for the writing on the wall that mystified Belshazzar. Letters of fire on the firmament would no longer terrify us; we should divine a connection with hair-dye or tooth-powder. Ah, the 'Free Press' is in a parlous state when it has to be kept alive by patent medicines! For the rest, the less freely we 'examine the works' of the Free Press the better. Your average journalist has his bread buttered literally on both sides; and it is a mere fluke which opinions he is paid to denounce. As for the People he caters for, its chief reading is scraps, and it prefers life-insurance to literature. When it reads that if 2,368,759 post-cards were piled one on top of another, you could only read the last one; or that 830,251 *h*'s were dropped in Seven Dials last Monday, it is happy. Lotteryture rules the roast, and letters are smothered beneath prize packets. The genius who divined what the age wanted deserved the fortune he made. The age of folios is past. The dear old folios, without which Charles Lamb found even heaven incomplete, are left to the book-worms—philological or entomological. Parasitic literature—books about books, reviews of reviews—is the only thing that pays. Intellectual laziness and the hurry of the age have produced a craving for literary 'nips.' The torpid brain requires but a lively fillip; it has grown too weak for sustained thought. Brevity must be the soul of everything; the wit can take care of itself. Even novels and plays must be short and not to the point. The book-worm has developed into the butterfly. The other great journalistic achievements of the age are *The Evening Eavesdropper*, *The Society Scandalmonger*, and *The Financial Filibuster*."

"How one-sided you are! The number of persons interested in literature has been immensely raised in the last half century."

"True; there never was an age in which so many people were able to write badly. And to think there is a man who wants to turn out writers like chartered accountants, and to grant poetical licences at a training-school for authors. Oh this modern eruption of black spots on white paper! The age needs to be taught to read, not to write. And it needs most of all to be taught not to write, especially not to write Recollections. Everybody sets about writing his Recollections, though nobody will recollect his writings. The sense of Art too, is dying. Novel-writing has become a branch of pamphleteering. The characters make talk in lieu of love or scenes. We have lady-writers more theological than logical, and romances which provoke rejoinders. Imagine a rejoinder to *Vanity Fair*, the overture to *Lohengrin*, or Millet's 'Angelus.' No, we are not an artistic people, the free glory of art is not for us. Not one man in a thousand understands technique in music or painting, or has a soul responsive to beauty, though all are willing to criticise freely in that exchange of ideas which between equals alone is no robbery. We English are always striving to reduce art to a science; it is the foible of all Philistine peoples. You have only to look at our dresses, our streets, our houses, our public buildings and statues, to see that as a people we have not a breath of artistic impulse. If that does not convince you, look at our art galleries."

"Still, at any rate, the stage is advancing."

"It is 'getting on.' So much so that it has been taken up by the Church—always a sign of material prosperity. But it is not advancing. Art is sunk in the artist or the tradesman. Actors are measured for their parts, even when they are not mere dummies. The 'star' system and the milky ways of burlesque are the most prominent objects in the dramatic heavens. Beauty, as Rossetti said, is genius—on the stage. The modern Marguerite is an actress, the jewels she craves are newspaper notices. 'Faust up to Date' is the man who can write or buy them for her. Alas for the Marguerite who lacks beauty! Not for her the furores of the footlights. Of her, though gold be showered like water, the princeliest Faust can but make a fashionable beauty."

"But look at the amount of good poetry written every year!"

"Granted. The poets are still with us. But they read one another. Poetry has always been a drug in the market."

"What! when Tennyson is worth a guinea a box—I mean a word!"

"A drug! a drug still! But having the Government stamp it sells like a patent medicine. Still, England must awake to art soon, for art will be the religion of the future, as religion was the art of the past."

"Art to be religion! When the Salvation Army is the biggest boom of the epoch!"

"The singing of comic psalms by the army will develop a sense of humour that will gradually kill it. The profits of the Salvation Stores will fall off, and the business will be turned into a joint-stock company. The Millennium will then be put on the market in one pound shares, and if it only promises to return a good percentage, it will be laid on quicker than by the combined efforts of all the preachers since Abraham. To be serious, the Church of the future will be Catholic—not that Catholicism which has yet to learn that open confession is bad for the soul (which comes to take it as expiation), but the Universal Church which teaches people not to save their souls but to use them."

"Ah, then, you hope for such a Church?"

"A little before the next glacial epoch. Human nature has so much to unlearn, and is cursed with such a good memory! Man has come to be a parasite on his own machinery. He is the slave of the ecclesiastical and political mechanism he has himself constructed. He cannot shake off the fetters of his past."

"That is nonsense. There are always great men who rise superior to machinery."

"And construct new. But do you still share the belief in 'The Great Man Myth'? The world is really old enough by now to know better. Some men may be born great, and some may achieve greatness, but most people thrust greatness on other people. The 'great men' themselves know better than to join the ranks of their admirers; if they don't, they are little men. While the hero-worshippers never think of the object of their adoration except in his great aspects, the mind of the hero is chiefly occupied with the consciousness of his little weaknesses. If he is proud at all, it is usually but self-conceit; for the object of his pride is some ability which he does not possess. The great painter is puffed up with the thought that he smokes the most judiciously chosen tobacco; the great musician fancies that he can skate very ornamentally; the great statesman imagines he can guess the plot of a sensational novel by reading the last page. The thing the great man can do consummately is of little concern to him; it is the air he breathes, and awakens no admiration in his own mind. The blind man wonders how any one can see; the street urchin sees, and does not marvel. The hero-worshipper stands outside and admires; the hero stands inside himself, and is indifferent or disgusted.

"One day, through some sudden loophole, the worshipper, too, gets a glimpse into the interior, and turns away to pick up some mud. To the ex-worshipper he is a monster; to himself he is the same man that he always was. He finds it hard to understand the change. What makes it harder in some instances is that by this time the fumes of the censers may have got into his brain, and persuaded him into the popular belief that he is not a mere man, with human passions and absurdities, but the peer of the gods. Unshaken by centuries of exposure, the great man myth still flourishes, and the educators of the public nourish the delusion which they may themselves profit by some day. There are men with great qualities; there are no great men."

"For all that I still believe in you."

"That is, you don't believe in what I say."

"Carlyle believed in great men."

"Because he believed in himself. He showed the air is always full of dust; dust of putrefying creeds and prejudices and decaying forms, and dust which a million hirelings throw daily into the eyes of Truth, and he taught that the universe is swept clean by a succession of scavengers, one or two a century; which is about the saddest theory of life ever formed. No, there are no great men; there are only famous men. And my Lady Fame is a Titania. The men at the top are too often Bottoms."

"Frankly, Mr. Brown, this is all the craziest paradox, and you contradict yourself consumedly."

"Paradox is platitude in the making; and self-contradiction is the essence of candour."

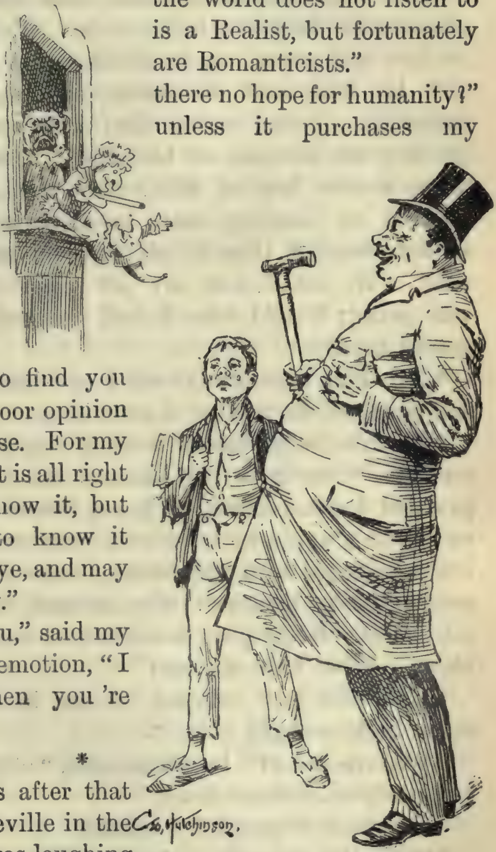
"Then your jaundiced vision sees nothing to praise, no nascent movement to encourage?"

"None; too many others see the rose-colour; for me, the yellow side of the shield!"

"Then you think there is use, as well as abuse, in the cynic?"

"Understand me. The cynic does not disbelieve in genuine things, only in the genuineness of things. He is the acid that corrodes things foul and of good report. As such he is indispensable."

"The world were happier without him."


Geo. Hutchinson.

"Happily the world does not listen to him. Nature is a Realist, but fortunately her children are Romanticists."

"And is there no hope for humanity?"

"None, unless it purchases my books telling it so."

"Thank you for your courtesy. I understand imperfectly. I am sorry to find you have such a poor opinion of the Universe. For my part, I fancy it is all right when you know it, but you've got to know it first. Good-bye, and may you be happy."

"Thank you," said my victim, with emotion, "I shall be when you're gone."

* * *

Two weeks after that I met Mandeville in the street. He was laughing heartily over a Punch and Judy show. When Punch whacked Judy the Pessimist's plump sides quivered, and tears of delight trickled down his cheeks. He greeted me effusively, and asked me to come up the river with him. The clerk of the weather had imported an Indian summer, and October was as pleasant as July had failed to be. We took the train to Kew and rowed up to Richmond, I pulling stroke and he bow, and *vice versâ* too frequently to be enjoyable. I had never seen him quite so boyish before; the success of his *Poems of Pessimism* had made a new boy of him; half a dozen times he insisted on changing seats in mid-stream. He was so light-hearted that I felt sure we should be capsized. He asked how my *At Home Every Monday* was going; I told him I had dropped it after the second number.

"But I'm sure everybody I saw had a copy of the first number," he replied in astonishment.

"I don't doubt you saw everybody had a copy," I replied; "but it is not because the thing wouldn't pay that I relinquished it; it was because I felt myself unable to grapple with the correspondence it involved. I was besieged with applications from all parts of the country from strangers who assured me they were celebrities. Every post brought me a furlong of interviews. What's the matter?"

Mandeville had dropped his oar in the river and fallen back mortally pale.

"Wh—a—a—t!" he stammered, "other people alsc had ready-made interviews!"

"Hundreds of people," I replied.

Mandeville groaned. "Another illusion gone!" He sat up slowly.

"What do you mean?"

"I thought I was original," he said in a low tone, his eyes seeking the planks of the boat.

"Well, what matters?" I said, as I rowed vigorously towards the drifting oar, and captured it.

"What matters!" he repeated, "when I have been all my life in quest of the original!"

"That 's not an original attitude," I replied.

"No," he said sadly. "The chase is not original, but the capture—ah!" he sighed deeply. "Take both the oars, old man. I will do all the work. I will entertain you by laying myself bare to you."

"What! going to have a swim? Well, be careful how you jump off."

"Don't be an ass! I refer to my psychical nudity. I need not say that I did not strip for my interview. But now I will be naked and not ashamed. Know then that every instant of time I can spare from the duties and pleasures of life is spent in fretting at the unelastic boundaries of existence. I hate this web of conventionality with which I am enmeshed. To be born, to suckle at the breast, to get the measles and the whooping cough, to become a boy, to develop a moustache and adolescent emotions, to grow from a youth into a man, and from a man to an old man—to have one's whole life marked out for you from the start without your leave or consent,—ugh! it is so conventional! My soul sickens at it. And then every day is a life in little. To get up and wash and dress and feed at intervals and go to sleep again—to have one's soul fettered and chained within the same narrow boundaries, to move in the same rigid rut as everybody else—it is abominable. Oh the horror of the natural conventional! The artificial conventional can be broken through, whatever the cost; but the natural conventional! It holds us remorselessly in its deadening grip, it squeezes us in its all-embracing folds, from the initial conventionality of our birth to the supreme conventionality—Death. We are all fashioned alike in our beginning, and we are run into the same mould at the end. My life has been one long effort to leave the path chalked out for me by the protoplasmic atoms. It has also been one long failure. To-day you have trampled upon another hope of originality; my patent interview has been done before."

He took out his note-book. "One more must be added to the list of burst bubbles," he said. "The figure runs into hundreds. One day I strung some of them into verse. Would you like to hear it?"

I replied that nothing would give me greater satisfaction, unless he could combine the recitation with a little attention to the tiller. Pulling the ropes lazily around him, the poet commenced:—

DONE BEFORE.

Sick of commonplace mortality, I have sought originality
By all ways I thought untrodden of a predecessor's feet;
I have always left the highway for the undiscovered by-way,
Haunted only by the terror lest a footprint I should meet.
When a boy I used to utter mild requests for bread and butter,
Although jam and cake were present in a freely-offered store;
And myself on this I flattered, till my first fond dream was shattered
When I read in Sunday-school books it had oft been done before.

I've been rich without frugality, I've been poor without formality,
I've been oft at home to bore and dun, and out to love and friend,
I have travelled in the first-class with a ticket for the worst class,
And the difference have tendered at the journey's other end.

I 've assured a deputation I deserved its gratulation,
I 've accompanied De Reszke or La Diva *with a snore ;*
I have stayed the year in London, in my search for something undone,
Quite forgetting those odd million folks by whom 'twas done before.

I have practised immorality to the verge of illegality,
Yet have never been a member of a Puritanic league ;
I have walked down Piccadilly, a perambulating lily,
Without boring my companion with my network of intrigue.
To its mother smiling smugly I have called a baby ugly ;
I 've admitted being sick before the vessel reached the Nore,
Though exact Returns of Income will at last to seem a sin come,
When you find that e'en the Revenue has not been "done" before.

Then with what I thought finality I have bid for immortality,
By reviewing learned books without the hope they 'd be revised,
And poetical collections without setting my affections
On the things therefrom omitted, over those therein comprised.
I've expressed my satisfaction, nor discovered lack of action,
In a drama by an author known in letters from of yore ;
But although I 've sent back proxies for a row of stalls and boxes,
Honest criticism even had been sometimes done before.

I have given hospitality with severe impartiality
To ideas congruous only in their being all my own ;
I have tried to write down motherhood and to found a White Rose Brotherhood
(*With the object of replacing the stray Stuarts on the throne*),
Plus ten ultra-modern isms and two neo-Paganisms,
And in analytic diary to strip me to the core ;
But what use my feigned brutality—all my pseudo-bestiality,
Since mendacious self-exposure had been often done before ?

I have painted Unreality, and composed without tonality,
I have lectured on the Beautiful in trousers, rugs, and hair,

And my Individuality I've developed by rascality,
And I've never lacked a genius (unknown) by whom to swear.
But in vain my comicality flashed in mad conviviality,
When against the bourgeois virtues I led off the tables' roar ;
Anti-Decalogicality, both in jest and actuality,
Had with vigorous vitality been too often done before.

Thus I've chased originality, though as if by some fatality,
With unfailing punctuality the thing has been a frost.
Did I sink to criminality, did I rise to high morality,
My "Love's Labour" always turned out most monotonously "Lost.'
I could not *escape banality though I shifted my locality*
And made search from Pole to centre for a yet untrodden shore.
Should I boil my spirit-kettle up on Popocatepetl,
I should find within a week the spot had oft been "done" before.

The Pessimist's candid confession shocked me greatly, for I was so enthralled by it that I allowed the boat to bump into another. Fortunately both sides came off with nothing beyond the first syllable of damage. We moored our vessel below the *Star and Garter*, and the Pessimist ate a hearty lunch. My rowing had given him an appetite ; and he enjoyed his Porterhouse steak none the less because it had been underdone before. After he had swallowed three-parts of the Porterhouse, he grew even more expansive, and showed me some sheets of his forthcoming book ; his latest snap at the tantalising Fata Morgana of originality.

"The year is drawing to its end," he said. "For the new year I am preparing a work called *The Cynic's Calendar*. Here is the proof for January." He displayed it on the tablecloth, reading it aloud :—

THE CYNIC'S CALENDAR.

BEING THE CALENDAR FOR JANUARY 1891, WITH MOTTOES FOR PIOUS REFLECTION.

1	Th.	New Year resolutions commence to be broken. *Youth is the season for enjoyment; old age for remorse that we did not enjoy ourselves more.*
2	F.	Jan. 1st resolutions finally abandoned. *Jan. 2nd thoughts are best.*
3	S.	Gretna Green marriages abolished, 1857. *Marriage is the primitive mutual admiration society.*
4	𝔖.	Lord Tomnoddy born, 1863. *It is better to be healthy and wealthy than wise; but if you cannot be any of the three, the next best thing is to be an English peer.*
5	M.	Execution of Fagin. *Honesty is the best policy for a man with a bad reputation.*
6	Tu.	Dividend on Consols due. *An honest man is good company, but nobody would take shares in him. He wouldn't pay—because he would.*
7	W.	St. Distaff. *Spinsterhood is an honourable estate, till the proprietress commences to rail at wedlock.*
8	Th.	Galileo died, 1642. *The wisest man is happy sometimes.*
9	F.	Napoleon III. died, 1873. *For success in life two qualities are required—a strong will and a weak conscience.*
10	S.	Penny Postage established, 1840. *If truth did not live at the bottom of a well, all social communion would be impossible.*
11	𝔖.	Cagliostro born. *The youth's bashfulness arises from his knowledge of his own ignorance; the man's assurance from his knowledge of other people's.*
12	M.	Hilary Term begins. *Law and journalism are the masculine substitutes for prostitution.*
13	Tu.	Dinas colliery explosion, 1879. *A sympathetic heart is the most terrible of congenital misfortunes.*
14	W.	Oxford Lent Term begins. *Let us all cultivate ourselves, as the wise Goethe teaches. And first of all the dung for manure!*
15	Th.	British Museum opened, 1759. *Every question is like a sheet of paper—much may be said on both sides. But for journalistic purposes it may only be said on one side.*
16	F.	Saturn sets. *Procrastination is the thief of time, and steals many an idle hour for us. Put off death or duty till to-morrow.*
17	S.	Benjamin Franklin born, 1706. *Poor Richard says, "The worst of having your bread buttered on both sides is, that if you drop it, it is sure to fall on the buttered side."*
18	𝔖.	Second Sunday after Epiphany. *There is a chamber in the heart to which even one's nearest and dearest are not admitted. It is the unholy of unholies.*
19	M.	John Wilkes expelled House of Commons, 1764. *No man has the right to bring into the world propositions which he is unable to maintain.*
20	Tu.	David Garrick died, 1779. *Fools follow rules; wise men precede them.*
21	W.	Cleopatra's Needle arrived, 1878. *Beauty is but skin-deep; but, as humanity doesn't sit in its bones, that is no drawback.*
22	Th.	Annual Dinner of the Society for Promoting Charity Advertisements. *Better a* nominal *sum in charity than an anonymous million.*
23	F.	William Pitt died, 1806. *We all love virtue; but few of us hope to possess her. We forgive ourselves for erring, for that is human; and for forgiving ourselves, for that is divine.*
24	S.	Dynamite outrage in London, 1885. *Hypocrisy is the last infirmity of a scoundrel.*
25	𝔖.	Burns born, 1759. *The Poet is born. Who ever maintained that he was a made man?*
26	M.	Great Famine in China, 1878. *A good dinner is the best joy of the hour that is; a good digestion of the hour that will be.*
27	Tu.	Emperor of Germany born, 1859. *Self-contempt is the one quality that raises man above the angels.*
28	W.	Paris capitulated, 1871. *Few men have courage enough to be cowards.*
29	Th.	George III. died, 1820. *The idol that had only feet of clay was indeed divine.*
30	F.	Charles I. beheaded, 1649. *Let him whom the cap fits wear somebody else's.*
31	S.	Hilary Law Term ends. *Make the best of a bad bargain. Let it be bad for the other party.*

"Underneath each page," he continued, "will be meteorological prophecies, with the proviso 'Wind and weather permitting.'"

"But this has been done before!" I exclaimed.

"Where?" gasped the Pessimist.

"In one of the comic papers," I replied.

"And I thought it was a funny idea!" he groaned, throwing the sheet into the fireplace, whence I extracted it for future use.

On the way back to Kew, whom should we meet but a trio of pretty girls, rowed by a tall young man, whom

I afterwards discovered to be unfortunate enough to be their brother. To my alarm the girls hailed Mandeville Brown laughingly, and he roused himself from his brooding, and responded with stentorian joviality. The tall young man and I kept the boats side by side, while the introductions were going on. The way Mandeville flirted across the strait with those three girls at the same time could only be compared to the achievement of a juggler who keeps three balls going at once. My alarm was soon, however, replaced by joy. I reflected that Mandeville was for ever debarred from marrying by the fact that it had been done before his birth. Besides, there was safety in numbers. No, the Bachelors' Club had crumbled, but the last three atoms were of adamant.

Our course was lively, for the girls chattered like magpies, while their brother broke in every now and again with some satirical remark at their expense. They were very affectionate though, for they went out of their way to call him a nice brother every time. Mandeville, too, was not silent; he has no talent in that direction; but effervesced with quips and cranks and wreathed smiles. I bore my share of the conversation patiently, and in silence; for Mandeville was never the man to spare a friend and save a joke.

Before we parted with the boat-load of fair maidens, Mandeville and I had promised to drop in the same evening for an "informal dance" in their house at Bayswater. He did not want us to go; but I intimated to him that I would not let my personal feelings be an obstacle. Informality, we found, meant an awning outside and a motley package of long-invited guests inside. I kept an eye on Mandeville, secure as I felt. He danced with a whole bouquet of wall-flowers; the bevies of beauty he left to others. To the guests this seemed generosity; to me his motive was as plain as his partners. For myself, having nothing to fear, I danced freely with youth and beauty, especially with the nymphs of the river. Their names were Alice, Maud, and Kitty, but I christened them for short The Three Graces. Presumably they were not triplets, but I could not tell the eldest from the youngest. I told one of them so, thinking how fortunate it was that truth and compliment should coincide. She tossed her head pertly, and I saw that she was the youngest. But I was not discomfited. I told her that I meant judging from their knowledge of the world, and was rewarded by a sunny smile. Most girls tell you they are not pretty, and etiquette demands you should call them liars. Kitty was not like that. She was a vivacious little thing, sprightly as a jackdaw, and innocent as a dove. She had violet eyes and pale gold hair, and a lovely blonde complexion, and danced with enthusiasm, tempered by science. She floated round among the congested human teetotums like a gossamer in petticoats. Almost for the first time I thrilled with the secret of dancing, and felt in my blood the voluptuous ecstasy of rhythmic movement. I took her down to supper out of gratitude. She did not seem hungry. She supped entirely off Mandeville Brown, washed down by claret cup. I saw that she was in love with the little man. It made me heartsick with annoyance. Brown was lost.

The dance became gayer after supper, the stiffness relaxing as the collars became limper. I took another Grace after the meal, and heard further praises of Mandeville, and learnt that he had presented each of the Graces with a volume of the *Poems of Pessimism* bound in morocco. I blushed for Mandeville, tarnishing these blithe and bonny specimens of English girlhood with his nauseous whinings, and defiling their air with his sickly unsentimentality. Why should they be told that existence was a curse, when they were living in such happy ignorance of the fact? I asked my partner, who was Maud, what they thought of his poems, and she replied that they all considered them awfully sweet and quite too lovely. I gained further fuel for suspicion from Alice's lips. I trembled like an aspen. Brown would marry Kitty, so as to prove to her that existence *was* a curse. Some men would rather abandon a tooth than a theory, and Brown was one of them. I went to the house of the Graces often to watch him. Most frequently he was not there, and I was relieved. Brown could be staunch after all. But, alas for human anticipation! Before the month was over Mandeville Brown, the Secretary to the Bachelors' Club, the forger of the weapons of our arsenal, the contemner of woman and man, the Poet of Pessimism, had been united in the bonds of unholy wedlock! He spent his wedding night at the Bachelors' Club, chatting with M'Gullicuddy and myself about its prospects. When morning dawned, he informed us he had been married the day before.

Horror congealed our blood. I was the first to speak.

"You old sinner!" I cried.

"Yes, but an original sinner, eh?" he said, with a happy smile.

"Who is she?" I breathed huskily.

"Oh, some emancipated young woman or other, *née* Matilda Crock I believe. But don't take this from me—I only met her the other day."

I turned away to hide my emotion. The President took up the cue.

"And whar is she, mon?" he said, in low ominous tones.

"Am I my wife's keeper?" demanded the Secretary in amaze.

"She needs one if she married you," I said hotly. "Where have you left her?"

"At the Registrar's door of course. Where else should a man leave his wife? She only married me to achieve independence. Why it should be more respectable for her to trollop about alone now than before I do not understand. However, that is Society's business, not mine."

M'Gullicuddy was too angry to speak. He shook his snuff-box, and his jaws quivered, but no sound came from them. I continued the conversation.

"You have told us why she married you. Why did you marry her?"

"Why?"

"Yes, why? Why this divorce from your past?"

Mandeville's plump sides trembled like a jelly.

"Ho! Ho!" he roared. "Did you really expect a cynic to believe his own maxims?"

"And so precipitately too!" I murmured, abashed at my own simplicity. "There was not even an engagement."

"Of course not. That is part of the originality; though not in itself quite uncopyrighted. I hate engagements. They are a failure. Oh the green-sickness of the betrothed! The sheep-eyed male, the trimanous female! I was married straight off the reel."

"But wharfor, mon, wharfor?" shrieked M'Gullicuddy, getting his breath at last.

"Cannot you guess?"

"No, *you* had nothing to gain. I can see no reason in the world," I said.

"Thank heaven!" said Mandeville fervently, "then I have done it at last!"

"Done what?" we said in a duet.

"Broken the bonds of predestination. I have married for no reason in the world. All the philosophers will tell you that man cannot act without a motive. It is a lie. I made up my mind to cheat the fates that have from the moment of my birth stifled me in the swaddling clothes of cause and effect. I determined at some great crisis to act without any reason whatever. There are, as O'Roherty once put it, only three great crises in a man's life—birth, marriage, and death. My birth had happened—it was too late to influence that now. To commit suicide without reason would meet the case; but then I should not have the satisfaction of conscious success. One last opportunity remained—marriage. I took it."

THE TRIMANOUS FEMALE.

M'Gullicuddy fixed him with a mocking eye. "There are evidently more reasons in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Mandeville. You married so as to take some great step without a reason—is that so?"

"That is so."

"*Well, wasna that a reason?*"

Willoughby Jones rushed forwards and caught the fainting Secretary in his arms. But Brown battled bravely with the dizziness that overcame him and freed himself from the clasp of his brother in misfortune.

"At least it is the best of all reasons," he said, with a pathetic smile. "And if my marriage was a failure after all, at any rate I can recall my wife now. I have her address. She will be able to visit us here, too. She is a married woman, you know. Strictly according to by-law, you see."

"Visit *us?*" The President's snuff-box dropped to the floor.

"Yes, of course I shall continue a member."

"Continue a member, mon, when you are married!" shrieked the President.

"Yes," shrieked back the Secretary, as an exultant gleam shot across his cherubic features. "*I shall be original after all.*"

"But we shall expel you!" I thundered.

"Indeed!" thundered back the Secretary. "You forget the by-laws I drew up. *It takes three to make a quorum.*"

Willoughby Jones rushed forwards and caught the fainting President in his arms. But M'Gullicuddy battled bravely with the dizziness that overcame him and freed himself from the polluting touch of the lower caste.

"There is yet one argument left, mon," said M'Gullicuddy, drawing himself up to his full height.

"Indeed?" said the little Pessimist mockingly.

The President of the Bachelors' Club took the Secretary by the scruff of the neck, carried him into the room adorned by his own texts, dropped him down the six stairs on to the landing, and locked the door.

A minute after the Pessimist beat clamorously at it.

"No admission," I said tauntingly.

"I am not going to make any," yelled the Secretary outside; or, to use the conventional phrase, the ex-secretary. "Bar your doors to me henceforward, as you will, have not I, a married man, spent a whole night as a member of the Bachelors' Club?"

"You have," I said feebly.

"*Then I am original after all!*"

"No!" thundered the President. "The thing has been done before."

"Done before?" I echoed.

"Done before?" came feebly from behind the panelling.

"Yes," said the President, taking triumphant snuff. "A shameless being has preceded you in this."

His voice sank and trembled at the recollection of the blasphemy. "Nay, more, he had the audacity to *become* a member although married, and for some time no one suspected him. I alone knew it, and I have hitherto covered up the scandal in my own aching bosom. He was a member before your time, Paul, and even to you the real truth was never known, Mandevill—ain!" he concluded suddenly with a burst of righteous indignation.

"Will you swear it?" came in a hoarse despairing whisper through the keyhole.

"I swear it," said the President solemnly. "By my immortal soul, I swear it. He was a gey clever knave, the member by whom the Club has been done before." A strange muffled rumble penetrated the woodwork

Terrified, I turned the key and opened the door. Mandeville Brown had rolled down the six stairs in a fit.

* * * * *

He lives peacefully at Bedlam now, and indites epigrams for the magazines and poems for the Mandeville Brown Societies. The poems are not so obscure as before; the epigrams he turns out automatically with the old topsy-turvy trick, only occasionally blundering into sense. Here are a dozen assorted specimens, which were printed in a leading monthly with stars twinkling between them. For price per gross apply to the maker.

"The English are the most un-English of peoples." "For illiberalism you must go to the Liberals." "Criticisms of works of imagination are the only realities." "The best memory is that which soonest forgets." "Science is systematised ignorance, and the naturalist is the man who knows nature least." "Charity is a cloak that disguises many sins." "None so blind as those who *will* see." "Goodness is the talent of fools; spell Duty with a big, big D." "No man waits for time or tide." "The villain lives in a villa." "Your thief is the only honest man; the rest of the population are dissemblers." "The worse the artist, the better the work of art."

He had one lucid interval, though unfortunately he did not write in it. It occurred in the train that was bearing him to his new home.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

"To Bedlam," replied his companions.

"It 's no use calling me lamb, for I 'm not going to bed," he said decisively.

They explained his real destination.

"But why there?" he queried querulously.

"Because you have lost your reason," they answered indiscreetly.

Mandeville Brown rose in spite of all their efforts and danced a jig on the foot-warmer.

"Heaven be thanked!" he cried. "The fates are foiled at last. *I am going to Bedlam without reason.*"

CHAPTER XII.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

It was a miserable evening about the middle of November. All day the sun had been shining brightly, and had been doing so since the beginning of the month. This wretched perversity in the weather had unsettled everybody. People were afraid to go out at night for fear of losing their way in the coming fog. But the sky remained beautifully blue and starry.

Since the unreasonable behaviour of Mandeville Brown, M'Gullicuddy and myself had been constant in our attendance at the Bachelors' Club. There was a considerable sum of money in the exchequer, owing to the working of the New Insurance System, and it had been swollen recently by one or two anonymous subscriptions from married ladies who lamented that their husbands had not had the benefit of a similar institution while they were yet celibates. If only the idea that we were a charitable organisation should spread abroad among the uninquiring, the reversion of the treasuryship would be worth having. Mandeville Brown had uncomplainingly added the post to his secretariat when Moses Fitz-Williams departed this life of ours; but now that Brown, too, had gone over to the majority, it became a serious question which of the remaining members should assume the weighty responsibility. It spoke well for the tenacity of purpose still inherent in the Bachelors' Club, that each and all of the members were anxious for the burden. We were ranged in two parties,—one in favour of the candidature of the President, the other of mine. There seemed no chance of settling the thing, for each side was unwavering in its unity. That was why, in spite of the attractions of the house of the Graces to which I was frequently invited, I went to the Club regularly, for fear M'Gullicuddy should pass illegal measures in my absence. M'Gullicuddy almost lived at the Club for a similar reason. The nuisance was that, though we were always together, we could get "no forrarder"; for not only were both parties evenly balanced, and so perfectly generalled that they moved as one man, but it was impossible for us to muster sufficient members to form a quorum. We compromised it at last by agreeing to divide the duties and other things, and to check each other's accounts and expenditure. Then the white wings of peace hovered once more over the Bachelors' Club, and all was bliss and brotherhood.

It was while doing our best to supply Nature's deficiencies in the way of November fog, by creating one in the inner sanctum of the Bachelors' Club, that the President and I heard a strange feminine voice in the smoking-room.

M'Gullicuddy's glass fell, like a barometer before a storm. I, too, was agitated by the novelty of a visitor.

"You must go out again," we heard the faithful Willoughby remark.

"We'll see about that," came the reply, in slow acidulated drops of sound. "Stand aside, or I'll send for a policeman."

At the mention of a policeman M'Gullicuddy started to his feet as if shot up by a spring. A policeman in the Bachelors' Club! The indignity was beyond forbearance.

"Only married ladies are admitted," said Willoughby in deprecatory tones.

"Aha!" hissed the lady, "then look at my marriage certificate."

From this "open sesame" there was no appeal.

"Very well, Mrs O'Flanagan," Willoughby was heard to say respectfully, "who is it you wish to see?"

"Mr. Andrew M'Gullicuddy," came the answer in clear vibrant accents.

"No! no!" gasped the President. He rushed to the door of communication and barricaded it with his back. I looked at my co-secretary in surprise. His face was ashen as his cigar-tip.

Willoughby Jones rattled the door, surprised at its unwonted refusal to comply with his wishes. "Mr. M'Gullicuddy," he called out, "here's a lady to see you—married,—Mrs. Patrick O'Flanagan."

"Say I'm not here," the President whispered to me.

Really, the calm way in which people ask you to imperil your immortal soul by telling lies for them is quite wonderful. Besides, I did not wish my friend to be found out by this woman, whoever she was; so I whispered to him that it was useless, for Willoughby had admitted that he was in by admitting the visitor.

"Say I'm not in," gestured the President to the dusky steward.

He was evidently bent on self-denial; but I do not believe in any form of that virtue.

"M'Gullicuddy," I said, "can you show any cause of just impediment to this lady's entry by by-law?"

"She is not married," M'Gullicuddy whispered hoarsely.

"How do you know?"

M'Gullicuddy was silent.

"Canna ye believe me, mon?" he said. "I ken her history."

I could see how excited he was by his dropping into his native Scotch. I sympathised with him deeply.

"Paul," he went on, "ye are a braw good fellow; tak' the lass away."

The shaking of the door continued.

"Open the door, M'Gullicuddy," said the lady in withering tones. "You won't slip through my fingers any more, I warrant."

At the word warrant the President trembled like a pet spaniel. Obeying an agonised sign from him I placed my back against the door. M'Gullicuddy then ran to the window, lifted the sash, and threw his left leg over the sill. I feared he meant suicide. The thought of the nocturnal fall of the President of the Bachelors' Club upon the pavement of Leicester Square filled me with horror. I rushed forward and caught him by the remaining leg, before I remembered the few inches of balcony on which he had meditated taking refuge. The door flew open behind me. The lady rushed in. I let go the President's writhing limb which hastened out upon the ledge; then I slammed the window down violently and turned round. Mrs. Patrick O'Flanagan and I were face to face.

"Stand aside, sir," said the tall, plump lady, waving her marriage certificate. "I saw the calf. I recognised it. I would know it among a herd of calves."

"What calf?" I said ingenuously.

"Oh, you are all leagued together!" she cried. "Stand aside, sir. I saw the leg."

"What leg?" I repeated.

"My leg," she answered. "Mine, if there is law in England."

"Excuse me, madam," said I, suspecting I had to do with a mad woman, "so far as I can see, you appear to me to have the usual quantity already."

"How dare you insult me, sir?" said the lady, flashing a small lightning-storm from her eyes, and drawing her skirts closer around her. "How dare you stand between husband and wife?"

"Husband and wife!" I said. "My dear lady, you have come to the wrong shop. This is a Bachelors' Club—we keep no husbands on these premises."

"No, indeed," she said, "they are off. Look there." I turned in the direction of her finger. The President's white face was pressed in agony against the glass; his head was hoary with snow, which had suddenly commenced to fall. I remembered that the ledge was short and narrow, and that it was dangerous to move hand or foot out there. Without assistance the President could not even get in again.

"That," I said, "is Mr. Andrew M'Gullicuddy."

"That," said she, "is Mr. Patrick O'Flanagan, my husband."

"It 's a dom'd lee," shrieked the President, his voice coming dim and faint through the panes. "As I hope for salvation, I am not this woman's husband."

"You wretch!" shrieked the lady. "Whose portrait is this, then?"

I turned to look at the photo, and banged my head against several other heads. They were the waiters' and the stewards' all bending down eagerly at the same instant. All the relics of the Bachelors' Club were gathered to watch this fateful scene. Things had, indeed, come to a pretty pass when the waiters were all awake together. I felt quite sore over it, and, with as much dignity as I could command, ordered them to withdraw. I was left in the room with the alleged wife of the President. I was determined that our underlings should not witness this crowning humiliation except through the keyhole.

The photo was not a bit like M'Gullicuddy, and underneath were the words, "Ever thine, Patrick O'Flanagan."

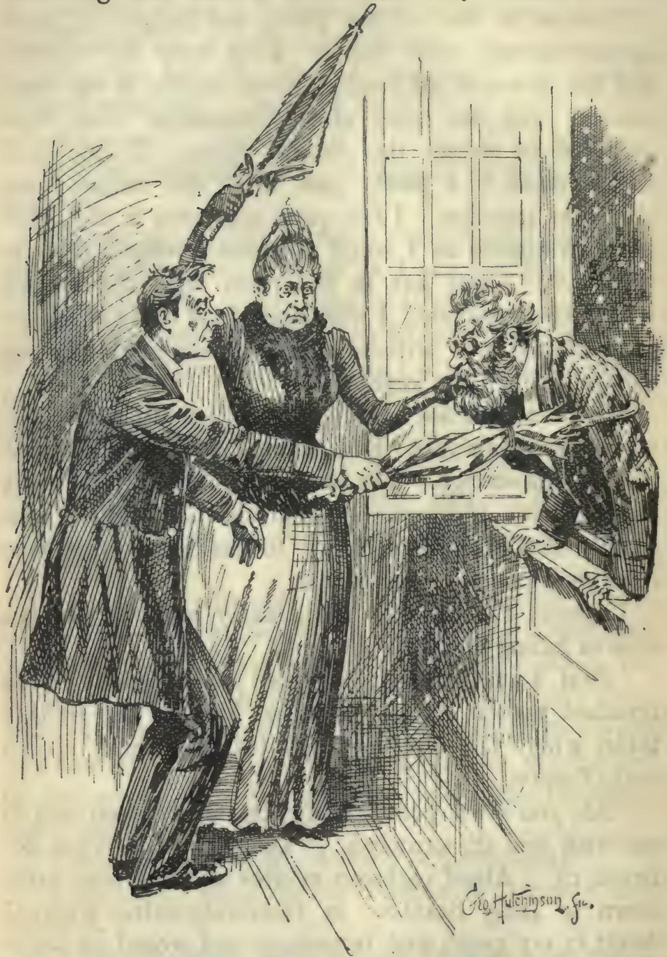
This was enough. The photo was evidently the work of an artistic photographer, and the handwriting was plainly M'Gullicuddy's, sloped to the left. Some men have such poverty of resources.

I opened the window indignantly and assisted his wife in haling him into the room.

"Paul, I am innocent," shrieked M'Gullicuddy in his broadest Scotch, as we deposited him on the writing table, where the blotting-paper thirstily drank up his coat of snow.

"Ah, you are a gentleman," Mrs. O'Flanagan said to me with fine discernment. "You, sir, shall judge between us. About eighteen months ago this man came down to Long Stanton, in Cambridgeshire, where I dwelt in my youth and innocence, and wooed and won my trusting heart."

She wiped away a tear with the marriage certificate which she still held in her hand. There was something confiding and candid about the very name of the place which added to the heinousness of M'Gullicuddy's offence. Long Stanton in Cambridgeshire!


Geo Hutchinson. fec.

"It's a dom'd lee," repeated the ungentlemanly person on the dripping writing-table.

"It's gospel truth," said Mrs. O'Flanagan. "My heart went out to the breezy Irishman with his bright spirits and his lovable brogue. Up till that date, sir, I had been a confirmed opponent of marriage. I had a younger sister who had married three times within four years; her husbands all dying within a year of marriage. I was afraid it might run in the family, and so I scrupulously refrained from being asked in marriage, for the sake of my husbands. But when Patrick O'Flanagan came through the door, my scruples flew out of the window. On a fair summer morning, no brighter than my heart, I placed my hand within his, and we were wed before the Registrar, for he would not go to church."

"It's a dom'd lee," said the President.

"Sit down," I said to the poor victim, as I wheeled her an arm-chair. "Go on."

"On leaving the Registrar's office, we took the train to Harwich *en route* for Holland, where we had located our honeymoon. On the way we chatted freely, for the train was crowded. All at once, as I was talking, Patrick turned pale. I asked what was the matter. He said he felt a little sick, the carriage was so stuffy. Shortly afterwards we arrived at a junction. The train stopped for five minutes for refreshment. Patrick got out to get a drop of brandy to put him right. The five minutes passed, the bell rang; I rushed to the window in case my husband had forgotten the carriage. I looked wildly up and down. Men were jumping in all along the station. 'Stand away there!' shouted the guard. He waved his flag, the station slid backwards, and we were off. Anxiety gnawing at my bosom, I comforted myself with the thought that he had just had time to pop into another carriage. But soon I learned the bitter truth. That junction was the parting of our lives. Like a true Irishman my husband preferred to spend his honeymoon alone. I never set eyes on him from that day to this. But my search has been successful at last, thanks to my having means and spending them freely in the search. By the aid of a private detective agency I learned that my husband passed under the name of M'Gullicuddy, and that this Club was his favourite resort." She turned to the President who still lay huddled together on the writing-table, his face as white as the driven snow outside.

"Now, Patrick," she said, "will you come away quietly with me to Holland for our honeymoon?"

The question made him sit up. But he did nothing but stare at her.

"Come, Patrick," she said, "come away, and all shall be forgotten and forgiven. Drink that glass of brandy and rejoin me in the train." She drew a gold watch from her bodice. "It leaves Liverpool St. Station for Harwich in eighty-five minutes. At 9 A.M. to-morrow we shall be in Rotterdam."

"How do you know?" gasped M'Gullicuddy.

"How do I know?" said Mrs. O'Flanagan, her voice breaking with infinite pathos and tenderness. "Have I not waited weary months for this hour? Have I not had ample leisure to study my Bradshaw? It has been the one relaxation in my misery. What has buoyed me up and kept me well and strong? Only the thought that some day, somewhere, you and I would meet again, Patrick; that some day, somewhere, again you would place your hand in mine, love; that some day, somewhere, you and I would walk to the booking-office together, and again I would take the tickets for Holland; that some day, dear, whether *viâ* Doncaster or Rugby, *viâ* Bradford or Glasgow, we should arrive at Parkeston Quay together, and together board the 9.50 Dutch boat, as if our honeymoon had never been interrupted, and the interim were an evil dream. When my search was weariest, and my courage lowest, and the horizon darkest, I turned to my Bradshaw and read for the thousandth time the message of hope and peace, and found therein comfort and courage. The pages are bedewed with my tears; but they are the tears of hope—not of despair."

My own eyes were wet as I listened. Oh the sublime patience and fortitude of woman!

"Come, darling," said Mrs. O'Flanagan. "The Harwich express starts in one hour twenty-one minutes."

"It 's a dom'd lee," said M'Gullicuddy automatically.

"Come, darling," repeated the poor, wronged lady, and every syllable was a caress and a pardon.

"Go away!" shouted M'Gullicuddy.

"Yes, that 's just what I mean,—go away," she said, "by the 8 P.M."

M'Gullicuddy got off the table and stood facing us.

"Paul," he said pleadingly, "tak the creature awa'! See her into the 8 P.M. express."

"My dear fellow," I said, "that is expressly your duty."

"What!" he cried in anguish. "Surely *you* don't believe I am this woman's husband."

"I do."

"But, Paul, my dear old friend, on my word of honour as President of the Bachelors' Club, she is no wife of mine. Don't you believe me? Yes, surely you believe me, Paul?"

I was silent. I remembered his vanishing leg. I remembered the photo. Decidedly appearances were against him.

"I cannot believe you," I said, groaning.

M'Gullicuddy echoed the groan and covered his spectacles with his hands. Mrs. O'Flanagan laid her hand tenderly on his head. He shook it off (the hand) and faced us again. A light, as of truth, gleamed from his eyes.

"Some day, Paul," he said, "you will recognise the injustice you are doing me. I am not this woman's husband. I swear it by all that I hold dear."

This was an awful oath; for there were few things which the economical Scotsman did not hold dear.

"Will you come by the 8 P.M.?" said Mrs. O'Flanagan imperturbably. "Come. By 9 A.M. we shall be in Rotter——"

The President finished the sentence, and continued resolutely: "Even if I am your husband I am not bound to live with you. That has been settled by law."

"Pardon me," said Mrs. O'Flanagan, "the decision to which you refer merely frees the wife from conjugal bonds. The husband has no such freedom."

"Then the sooner a Men's Rights Party is formed the better," said the President.

"The sooner men do what is right the better," retorted the lady. "Patrick O'Flanagan, I remind you once again that you have taken upon yourself the solemn obligation to be loved, honoured, and obeyed by me, Isabella Fallowsmith, till death us do part. Come, Patrick, let us catch the 9.50 Dutch boat."

"Paul," said the poor President, "you believe this strange woman rather than your own colleague? What if I could prove her mistaken?"

"Then you may send for a strait waistcoat for me," said the lady impulsively.

"Will you go away, as my friend asks you, if he proves you are not his wife?" I said.

"I will. If he is not my husband, I will obey his wishes."

"Good," said M'Gullicuddy. "Look at me, Miss Fallowsmith; do you recognise me as Patrick O'Flanagan?"

"I do," she answered in a clear steady voice.

"You would identify me anywhere?"

"Anywhere."

M'Gullicuddy passed his hand over his face like a conjurer.

"*Now* do you recognise me as Patrick O'Flanagan?"

A cry of surprise burst from our four lips. The President had put quite a new face and complexion on the matter. His spectacles lay on the floor and woebegone wisps of beard and wig were fluttering towards them. The President had stripped his face to the skin. I no longer knew him. Joy overcame my astonishment. I turned triumphantly towards Mrs. O'Flanagan. The honour of the Club was safe.

"*Now* do you recognise him," I repeated sternly, "as Patrick O'Flanagan?"

"Ah, Patrick! Patrick!" sobbed Mrs. O'Flanagan, throwing herself passionately on the President's bosom. "Now at last I recognise you. Oh, why did you hide yourself so long from your poor Isabella?"

With one hand she encompassed his neck, with the other she tendered me the photo afresh. I scanned it again. Yes, it had not been taken by an artist after all. M'Gullicuddy had not counted on that photo when he played his little game of brag with the woman who had circumvented him at it. The expression on his new countenance alone belied the smirking photo.

"I felt sure it was you, dear," sobbed his wife, "by your getting out of the window for refreshments when I came along. I did not recognise you in the least but I had faith in you, and went on appealing to the old memories, thinking that if you were you I should find a soft spot in your heart at last."

She *had* found a soft spot—only it was in his head. I was disgusted with his stupidity. To have been double-faced to so little purpose!

M'Gullicuddy disentangled himself from Mrs. O'Flanagan.

"Well, now you recognise me, Miss Fallowsmith," he said, "I had best tell the truth; but not unless you swear to keep what I say secret."

We swore. "Good," said M'Gullicuddy. "Now I can speak."

At this Ibsenite commencement I prepared for the worst.

"Remember," he said. "You have promised me the privilege of the confessional! I am speaking not to phonographs but to priests."

We were awed by his manner. I stole to the door, threw it open suddenly, and allowed Willoughby Jones to fall forward into the inner room, the other married men coming tumbling after. Eavesdroppers never hear any good of others—nor want to. I spurned the squirming heap with my foot, and swept it outside. I then gave it a holiday for half an hour, and it scampered down-stairs. I locked the outer portal of the Bachelors' Club, and the apartments were converted into a sanctuary. I returned to the inner chamber.

"Now," said I, "we are alone. Now let us have the promised truth."

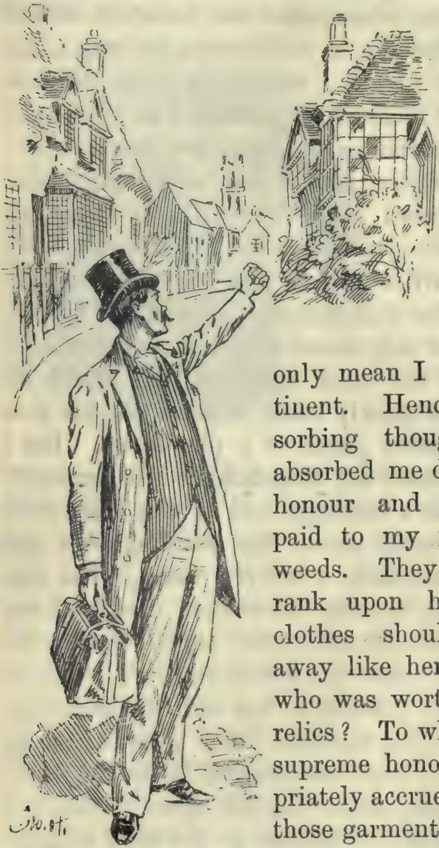
"I will do my best," he replied modestly. "The truth about me is very simple. I am not Mr. O'Flanagan, and I am not the husband of this lady."

"But if that's the truth, you've told us it before!" I cried, a wild hope resurgent in my breast.

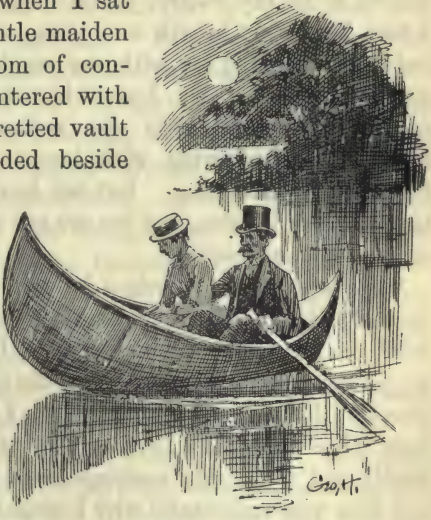
"Yes, I could not help it," he said deprecatingly. "Please don't interrupt me, Paul. I cannot be this lady's husband because I married another lady a year before she claims my hand. Don't interrupt me, Miss Fallowsmith. You see, Paul, you wouldn't have confidence in my innocence under this cruel charge," he said plaintively. "Such is friendship. My name is not O'Flanagan at all. It is Parker—Peter Parker. My marriage took place at Macclesfield. The circumstances of the wedding were rather out of the way. I regret I was not one of them at the time. But a mocking Fate overrules our destinies.

"All my misfortunes in life have arisen from the unfortunate age at which my father died. If he had died a little later I should never have been married; if he had died a little earlier, I should never have been born. Not having had time to discover his vices, my mother cherished the memory of his virtues. She thought him a paragon among men, and believed even in his epitaph. She wore black for him all the days of her life. Her mourning habit became a second nature to her. She was beautiful, as you may judge, and was often pressed to marry again. But her constancy was proof against all solicitations. She told her suitors that she had vowed to wear widow's weeds for her first husband while life lasted; and so they went their ways. But at last a young Scotsman from St. Andrews University came along and fell in love with her, and wrote sonnets on her eyebrow and other inconvenient places. He asked her hand and she pointed to her bonnet. He reflected that it would be very economical to have a wife who always dressed in black, and so they were married. The bride went to church in a mourning coach, and wore a long crape veil and a black silk gown, trimmed with sprays of yew, for she was not one who took her grief in lightening shades. My step-father did not effect the saving he had reckoned, for his wife indulged in all the luxuries of woe, and dealt only at the most artistic establishments. People used to call him the widower till my dear mother died; then in self-defence, they were forced to call him the Bachelor. My mother's death affected me deeply—it seemed as if the light and joy of the house had departed when her sable robes ceased to trail and rustle about the rooms. From earliest childhood those funereal garments had been part of my consciousness. All my infant associations were

entwined round those widow's weeds. My heart's tendrils wound themselves about her crape-wreathed bonnets. Her touching devotion to my father, while life pulsed in her veins, consecrated our home life with a halo of purity and poetry, to which even my step-father was not insensible. I felt I was not as other children. That high example of steadfast pursuit of an ideal amid all the sordid pettinesses of existence made life a deeper and a nobler thing for me than for my playmates, and I always selected black marbles and tops, and manifested an early preference for blackberries. My mother was the only woman I ever cared for. *Please* don't interrupt, Miss Fallowsmith. Her death left me heart-broken. The only consolation was her wardrobe. I wandered amid the black hangings with which all the cupboards were thickly lined, as some pensive poet wanders in the sombre glades of a pine-forest. But I had reckoned without my step-father. He promptly sold off my mother's leavings, and it was only with difficulty that I could secure the wedding-robes and the other appurtenances of a widow's outfit. The care of these henceforth became the solemn charge of my life. I wrestled with the moths and did battle with the rust. As from her grave my gentle mother's influence was still upon me; I owed to her still an ennobling ideal and a sanctifying mission. Her weeds saved me from suicide. They kept me straight in the tangles of temptation. My step-father married again. Unmoved by that high example of fidelity to the dead afforded him by my mother, he took another wife to his bosom. To see my step-step-mother flaunting in white jarred upon a vision habituated to sable of the deepest dye. My deepest emotions were outraged. I left the house almost immediately after the wedding breakfast. Bearing with me only my mother's drapings and trappings of woe in a Gladstone bag, and leaving behind me nothing but a curse, I shook the rice of the threshold off my patent leather shoes and went forth into the wide, wide world. Not that I had not been in the world before—I only mean I went to the Continent. Henceforward the absorbing thought of my life absorbed me deeper still. Due honour and respect must be paid to my mother's widow's weeds. They should not grow rank upon her grave. Her clothes should not moulder away like her dear self. But who was worthy to wear those relics? To whom would those supreme honours most appropriately accrue? Whom would those garments fit?



"There was only one possible answer. My mother's mourning could only be worn by her son's widow. Those hallowed relics and heirlooms could enshroud no woman less sacred. None but her son's widow could step into her shoes. They must be kept in the family. Hitherto I had been a confirmed bachelor. I had wished no woman's face to come between me and my mother's. But now it was borne in on me that it was my sacred duty to marry. It behoved me to take a wife. How otherwise could I create a widow to be a background to those dresses? The model widow for those weeds must be my own. I obeyed the voice of conscience; I looked out for a widow. Often I thought I had found a fitting wearer for those precious garments; often I was on the point of proposing to lovely virgins, on whom they would have looked beautiful; often when I sat with some fair gentle maiden in the green gloom of conservatories, or sauntered with her beneath the fretted vault of heaven or glided beside her on the quiet moonlit lake, or watched with her to see the sun set in serene splendour behind the everlasting hills—often have I measured her waist with my circumambient arm to see if she were the fitting bride for me. In five cases the dimensions were suitable. I measured again and again till there could be no possibility of mistake. Only three maidens stood this more



searching test. These I was within an ace of selecting. Flushed with the emotions of the moment, enraptured by the perfection of the measurements, overwhelmed by the glories of sunset or moonlight, I have three times been on the point of asking some lovely damsel to be my widow; to link her life with my death; to be mine in the heart's beat, mine in the breath, and follow me to the world's end in the next carriage to mine. But I always restrained myself. In the supreme crisis one thought always arrived with a respite. How did I know that this beautiful girl, whom I was on the point of rashly asking to be my widow, would outlive me? Suppose I took her to my hearth and home, and then she died before me, leaving me with my mother's mourning on my hands again! No, I must be prudent. True, each of these beautiful girls was radiant with life and happiness, overflowing with buoyancy and freshness like a spring morning. But we have it on authority that all flesh is grass, and we are cut down in a moment as by a reaper's sickle.

"No, marriage is at best a lottery. What if I found myself saddled with a woman who would not be able to fulfil the functions of widowhood? I should be unable to get the marriage set aside, for the stupid law had not provided for the contingency. No, I would not take a leap in the dark. If I married, I must choose my widow wisely and well. My marriage must not be a failure.

"Now you understand why I sought the hand of Mrs. Carcanet. After months of misery at Paris and Monaco, I returned to England. Fate took me to Macclesfield and introduced me to Mrs. Carcanet. —*Please* be silent, Miss Fallowsmith.

"Mrs. Carcanet was at that time the talk of the town. She was a professional widow—not a raw and inexperienced widow like my mother, for she had been bereaved three times. There was nothing particularly attractive about her, yet she changed her name as frequently as a stage-adventuress. Nor was there the slightest breath of scandal against her, for though her three husbands had perished, they had done so under circumstances beyond her control. One had been attacked with cramp while swimming, another had succumbed to measles, and the third had won a thousand pounds in a railway accident.

"The curious part of it was that all three had died within a year of marriage. Yes, yes, sit down, Miss, I know exactly what you 're thinking about. When I have finished, you shall speak. The third man was warned by all his relatives, and the local insurance branch wanted a higher annual premium, but he laughed at their superstitions. When the crash came and his dead body was identified in the mortuary, few had sympathy with the blasphemer. His death was felt to be a judgment, as his living over the twelvemonth would have been considered a want of it on the part of the higher powers.

"I felt at once this was the woman for my matrimony. She at least would make a true widow for me. I thought of her as more literally 'The Mourning Bride' than Congreve's heroine; she was always just wed or just widowed. Her life was like the first column of *The Times*—nothing but Births, Marriages, and Deaths. If I married her, I should die within a twelvemonth, and my marriage would be consummated. The claims of filial piety would be satisfied, for I was confident that with the opportunity of quietly talking things over, afforded by the honeymoon, I should be able to induce my wife to mourn for me in the same sacred clothes in which my mother had mourned for my father.

"It was no easy task to secure the hand I coveted, for after she had saved the thousand pounds from the crash to which her third husband had fallen a victim, Mrs. Carcanet became again the cynosure of all neighbouring bachelors' eyes. There was a morbid fascination about her which impelled men to throw themselves at her feet, as though they had been moths and her toes luminous.

"But none had so much at stake as I; the thought of my mother's ebon clothes lent me eloquence, and filial devotion carried the day. When our engagement leaked out, the stonemasons of Macclesfield touched their caps respectfully when I passed.

"For nine months I lived in perfect happiness with my intended widow. Everything had been arranged for my decease; the woman who had plighted her troth to me, to become my widow when death did us part, had engaged to lament me in the hereditary weeds of the family. My will was made. Everything had been left to my future widow on that understanding.

"During the tenth month I began to get uneasy. No signs of sickness had appeared. I felt as strong as a drayhorse and as healthy as a hippopotamus. The eleventh month passed; still not a shade of a shadow of a symptom of bodily derangement. I could not feel unwell though I tried. I read all the quack medicine advertisements. I pored over the properties of the patent pills, which no family should be without. I studied the records of the supernatural syrups. Not even thus could I experience any unpleasant sensation. My head was not dizzy, nor were my loins heavy, nor was my digestion sluggish. Little black spots did not dance before my eyes. My pulse was methodical, my respiration easy, and my tongue did not wear a morning coat. I began to get seriously alarmed. The days slipped by slowly; but at last the twelfth month arrived. The townsfolk stared after me now when I walked in the street, and necks were craned out of windows, as though I were a condemned criminal *en route* to the scaffold. The notoriety became disagreeable, and during the last month of my existence, I determined to be a celebrity at home. In the third week an old schoolfellow named Eaveson called on me. He asked me how I felt. I said I was sorry to say I had been feeling far from ill lately. He inquired what were the prospects of my dissolution. I said that death from natural causes seemed improbable, but I was looking confidently forward to an accident, and hoped, by care and attention, to meet with one within a few days. He warned me not to build too much on that chance, for accidents would happen even in the best calculated schemes. I replied that if I stopped at home, as I intended to, I had every right to rely on the accident coming off. I reminded him of what the *Lancet* told us every week of the perils that bestrewed our paths, the poison that lurked in the pot, and the disease that dribbled from the kettle; of the contagion that clung to bootlaces, and the arsenic that was wafted from the wall-paper; I recalled to him the dangers of fires and gas explosions and armed burglars and overtoppling mirrors and falling chandeliers; and I read out to him a graphic account of the germs and insidious particles that were fooling around in the domestic atmosphere, and which could only be foiled by Badberry's Cocoa, from the use of which I carefully abstained. But he shook his head sceptically and went off, leaving me forlorn and discomforted. Next day he returned and inquired after my health again. His face brightened when I told him my condition was unchanged. He said I must not mind if he came to inquire every day, and even twice a day, because he felt very anxious about my health. I told him it was very good of him, and pressed his hand affectionately, and said that I had never believed in friendship before, but now I should carry to my grave the memory of his disinterested anxiety.

"'Never say die!' he replied cheerily. 'I always said you would weather the marriage. And what's more, I don't mind telling you now, I've backed my opinion heavily. I have ten thousand pounds on you.'

"'What do you mean?' I gasped.

"'Why, I've made wagers amounting in all to ten thousand pounds, partly with natives, partly outside, that you will live beyond the usual twelvemonth. At first I got large odds, for the starting-price was whatever I pleased, as I stood almost alone in my belief in you. Then the betting became level, while now that you have only a few days to die, the tide has turned and I have had to give three to two. Yes, my boy, I have stood by you all along,' he said, slapping me cheerily on the back; 'I am none of your fair-weather friends to fire salute guns only when you get into port. When every one spoke ill of you, and speculated on your death, I alone was your friend for life. When things looked blackest and most funereal, I alone believed in you and defended your life against all odds.'

"I said with emotion that I would remember him in my will, and that he might look for a legacy in a few days. He answered warmly that he preferred my life to any legacy I could leave him. Again I pressed his hand, and the faithful fellow took his leave.

"But he left me food for reflection, which I was not slow to digest. When Eaveson called the next day, I asked him if he was sure to get his ten thousand if I remained alive. He said that the losers were all reliable persons, and in any case he could recover these debts legally, as the transaction was not a gambling one but a form of life assurance. I then informed him that unless he went halves with me I should die. He grew pale, and besought me to reconsider my determination. I said I had always lived to please myself, I was not going to live to please him now. He said he would leave no stone unturned to save my life. I said that if it were saved in mere consols it would tot up to nearly £300 a year; and that unless I could save half my life for myself, I would have none of it. The only way to prevent my death was to give me the £5000. I pointed out that if I lived, Eaveson would get all the meat and I all the bones; that he would net £10,000 while I should be left married to an unattractive and faded widow who was not even *my* widow. I wanted to know what there was for *me* to live for?

"In the end it was agreed to split my life fairly between us both, Eaveson trying in the meantime to increase its value. And now all my thoughts changed as by magic. The will to live took the place of the readiness to die. The chance of realising £5000 comes but rarely in a lifetime; the chance of dying is always to be had. There was plenty of time yet to provide a widow to wear my mother's clothes; they should be shelved but not forgotten. I had perhaps been needlessly precipitate. The revived will to live brought with it all the anxieties of which Stoics, Quietists, and Buddhists warn us. To wish to live is to fear to die. Now that I craved for life, a terror that I should die within the week whelmed my soul. Was I really destined to escape my wife's baneful spell? Why should I be luckier than the three men who had gone before? I communicated my fears to Eaveson. The panic seized him too. What was to be done?

"The solution flashed upon me suddenly. The mortal peril that threatened me arose from my marital relation to the fatal widow. If I ceased to be her husband, the spell would probably not work. But unfortunately a divorce in this unhappy country takes time, and the end of my year was bearing down upon me like some grim express. A divorce was out of the question; I must be content with the next best thing. To cease being Mrs. Carcanet's husband I must become somebody else's. That, if not a legal divorce, would, at least, be a moral one. I told Eaveson the idea. He said that it was bigamy. I said that that didn't matter. Even bigamy ceased to be a crime when one's life was in danger. Crimes committed in self-defence, to save one's life, were whitewashed by the codes of all countries. Desperate evils required desperate remedies. In my situation, I said, bigamy would be quite laudable. The only trouble was to find a fresh bride to be my widow. I dared not look for her in Macclesfield, because she would know of the existing wife, which would probably set her against the match. But if I left the town, then, as Eaveson pointed out, there would be some difficulty in proving that I was alive. True I might return temporarily to Macclesfield just to be identified, but then my first wife might get hold of me, and I could not bear the idea of living any longer with the insipid partner I had selected only to die by. It was, indeed, a dilemma. This time Eaveson came to the rescue. I was to leave Macclesfield on a pretext to my wife, who was unaware of the dead-and-alive gossip that circled round us. The gossips would think I had crawled off like a wounded snake to die alone. After the honeymoon, which would be also after the magic twelvemonth, I was to return to Macclesfield on a pretext to my wife (number two), but only to visit my lawyer and other reputable citizens on pretended matters of business. I was also to be casually photographed; so that after I had gone, the developed negatives might be positive evidences to my identity. Then, before the news of my coming had spread to my wife, I was to fly again, returning to my second wife or not as inclination prompted.

"Trembling for my life, I put into execution the plan so hurriedly sketched out. I told my wife a relative had died, and I had to go and see about some property he had left me. The dwelling-place of my second wife I ascertained by sortilege. I opened my Bradshaw at hazard, and stuck a pin into the leaf. It made a hole in Long Stanton. I was in Long Stanton next day with my mother's weeds in a Gladstone bag, and barely a week to spare. My life trembled in the balance. Only a second marriage could save me from the maleficent baleful magnetism radiating from my first wife, who seemed to hypnotise her husbands away. Could I find another wife in a week? On that question hinged my whole existence. I adopted the name of O'Flanagan with brogue and beard to match. I met an old, I mean, I met Miss Fallowsmith, and married her before the Registrar, as she has told you. *Will* you sit down and let me finish my story? Now you shall hear why I left you. Oh, but of course you have guessed it by now, Miss Fallowsmith. You are Mrs. Carcanet's sister, you had quarrelled years ago, and lived apart, and without corresponding with each other. When on our first wedding journey you blundered into saying something which revealed to me the fatal truth, I felt that death were, indeed, better. It was horrible, nefarious beyond the dreams of a Caligula or a Cenci. *I had married my undeceased wife's sister.* At the first stopping-place after that awful revelation I jumped out and left you. You will admit it was the most honourable course. Don't sob on my breast, please, I only did my duty. Do sit down, there 's a good creature. From the moment I left you my life has been one long haunting terror. I had contemplated merely bigamy, but I had committed the unpardonable sin, for which there can be no forgiveness in earth or heaven. If to marry one's deceased wife's sister is so revolting an offence, what must it be to marry one's *un*deceased wife's sister? It is iniquity so dire and unspeakable that the very law has neglected to provide against it. The awfulness of this form of bigamy is increased by the fact that there is no repairing the evil. If your first wife dies, you cannot patch up the past, for you cannot legitimise your second wife, since she is your deceased wife's sister. If, on the other hand, your second wife dies, the case is worse, for you remain actually married to your deceased wife's sister, having moreover inveigled the law into solemnising a marriage it prohibits. No, no, my dear Miss Fallowsmith, let me finish. Can you wonder that I dared not return to Macclesfield lest my sin should find me out? How Eaveson fared I have never learnt. I trembled at my own shadow, thinking it a policeman on my track. My day was one long bolt from the blue-coated officials. I dared not leave the country lest my perturbation should excite suspicion. There are always so many detectives about the docks. The one safe place for me was London, the great wilderness of London; the one safe disguise that of a Scotchman. I had been an Irishman. I am an Englishman. As a Scotchman I should be comparatively secure. I bought a pair of goggles with

plain glasses (for my sight is excellent), a snuff-box, and a coloured handkerchief, and took the name of Andrew M'Gullicuddy. But it was too much trouble to speak like an anglicised Scotchman all day long. Besides, there was always the danger that I would forget the accent when my temper was ruffled. I hit upon the happy idea of speaking Scotch (so-called) only when I was in a passion or excited. Not only would the strain be less, but the genuineness so much more convincing. The most cultured speaker of a foreign tongue slips into his native idiom under excitement. With a little care I trained myself to talk Scotch whenever I felt angry or otherwise moved. The dodge succeeded perfectly. Not even you, Paul, have ever suspected me of being a Birmingham man, plain Peter Parker. But I was yet far from easy. The fear of detection still made life a nightmare. My disguise was not yet impenetrable. Something more novel and audacious was necessary to cover up my trail. What fresh red-herring could I draw across my track? The idea was long in coming, but it came at last. *I invented the Bachelors' Club.* If I founded a society based on celibacy and misogyny, my guilt would be buried beyond the fear of exhumation. Who would ever dream of identifying Andrew M'Gullicuddy, President and Founder of the Bachelors' Club, with Peter Parker *alias* Patrick O'Flanagan, bigamist, married to his undeceased wife's sister?"

"You double-disguised villain!" I burst out, for I could contain myself no longer. "So this was your pretty design, eh?" I rushed wildly at the epigrammatic tapestry, and clawed at it in my rage. "Out upon you, foul Chimera, compact of perjury and falsehood! So you have used your friends and abused your office but to cover up your trail. While I was trembling to acquaint you with a secession, you were yourself a marital monster, a double-dyed husband. There is not a single law or by-law of the Club but you have trampled upon it."

"Pardon me, Paul," replied the President, his voice quivering with emotion. "This is too much. Call me a bigamist if you will, but do not say I have trampled upon the code of the Club, for it is a meanness I would shrink from. Am I not over thirty years of age? I am. Have I ever had a disappointment in love? I have not, for I have never loved. At first we used to ask of the candidate 'Has he ever been married?' and as I, the President, was more than married, my conscience used to wince a little. But I took advantage of your weak-minded striving for epigram to suggest the later form 'Has he ever had a disappointment in love?' You all snapped greedily at the bait, forgetting that the formula did not exhaust all the possibilities, but allowed a man who had married, but not for love, to slip through. Besides, you forget *I* was never a candidate."

The President's arguments left me breathless.

"But at first—at the foundation?" I gasped.

"Well, what of that?" inquired M'Gullicuddy. "Did I ever tell a single syllable of untruth about it? Did any one ever ask whether *I* was married? No; it was I who organised this Club; it was I who broached the idea to Mandeville Brown, and he jumped at it eagerly, for it fell in with his humour. But I told him I would not allow him to co-operate with me unless he could satisfy my most searching inquiries as to the integrity of his bachelorhood and the wholeness of his heart. He submitted willingly to my examination, and I passed him with honours. It never struck him to examine his examiner. (Even when I crushed his claim to originality by assuring him that another married man had previously remained in the Club, it never struck him that it was I.) We two sought out a third and so on. My inquiries into each neophyte's antecedents were so minute and detailed that they never dreamt of asking for mine. My criticism was so severe, my scorn for the Benedict so unconcealed, that my power and position were never once questioned in the whole history of the Bachelors' Club. I never evaded the tests, for I was never tried by them. Do me the justice, Paul, to admit that I have always striven with veritable single-hearted zeal to uphold the dignity and the laws of our Society, now, alas! moribund, and that I have been an impeccable President of the Bachelors' Club."

I saw that he was right. How I had wronged this great and good man! Remorse rent my over-charged bosom. I fell at his feet and craved his pardon and his blessing.

"Rise, Paul," said the kindly President, in tremulous accents, "you are forgiven."

"And *you* are forgiven, my dear, good Patrick!" came suddenly from the lips of the woman, whom we had both forgotten in the last exciting moments of M'Gullicuddy's monologue. "I may speak now?"

"Yes, Miss Fallowsmith, you may speak now," said the President wearily.

"Then, Patrick, there is yet time to catch the Harwich boat."

"Eh, lass?" said Peter Parker, so startled that he slipped perforce into M'Gullicuddy.

"Yes, you are my husband now, if not when you married me. I was right after all when I claimed you as mine."

"I canna be your husband."

"You can, and are. My sister is dead. She died soon after your leaving her. Your disappearance, taken in conjunction with the deaths of her three other husbands, excited suspicion. She was alleged to have made away with you. The investigation conducted in consequence so upset her that she died."

"False deceptive creature!" cried the President. "Then she will never wear my mother's weeds after all! I had intended leaving her a dying confession and these clothes, with fresh testamentary adjurations to wear them. But that is over now." He wept silently.

"Do not take on so, Patrick," said Miss Fallowsmith, with infinite tenderness, as she passed a gentle hand over the remains of his hair. "There is yet balm in Gilead. Is not your own Isabella here to bear your burdens and to soothe your sorrows? Come, love, remember that if you have lost your first widow you have still a widow left to you. I will wear those garments for you when you are no more, oh how gladly!"

Peter Parker looked up. The tear in his eye was blent with a sunny gleam of hope. Then the rainbow faded away again into mist.

"But they do not fit you."

"Oh yes, love, measure me, measure me," she cried eagerly, placing his arm round her waist.

"Your diameter is too extensive," he said sadly. "You will burst your cerements—I mean my mother's mourning."

"No, no!" she cried ecstatically. "If that is all, Patrick, do not spurn me as unfit to be your mate and widow. I can reduce my weight, dear; I will take daily exercise, darling; I will use anti-fat, love; anything to make me worthy to be your widow. Oh, if there is no other way, Patrick, I would willingly starve to make you happier, dearest. Only give me leave to try, and you shall see that I will fit them, my darling, my own and only love." Her eyes lit up in sublime abnegation. Her look was that of a saint. Oh the mirific workings of love, transforming the most prosaic clay to the similitude of an angel!

"But you are my deceased wife's sister," faltered the President.

"What is that, love? Come, let us catch the Dutch boat. Other countries are not so cruel as ours. Let us continue our interrupted honeymoon to Holland. There we shall be made one."

"But it 's such an unco awfu' nicht for the passage!" pleaded M'Gullicuddy excitedly.

"The night will be all right," she replied optimistically.

"Tell Willoughby to fetch me a cab," groaned the President helplessly.

Deeply moved by the pathetic scene I darted out, unlocked the outer door, and looked down the stairs. Neither Willoughby Jones nor any of the waiters was to be seen. I ran down into the twinkling square; the snow was still falling, and in tremendous flakes. I hailed a four-wheeler myself. The bridal pair were close on my heels. They jumped in.

"Liverpool Street, *viâ* Brunswick Square," called out the President. "I must get the Gladstone bag with my mother's weeds," he explained to his intended widow.

"Drive for your life," said Mrs. M'Gullicuddy, *alias*

O'Flanagan, *alias* Parker. "A sovereign if you catch the 8 P.M."

I closed the door of the cab.

"Here, Paul," said the President, holding out something to me. For a moment I thought he had mistaken me, in his perturbation, for the usual loafer, and was handing me a copper. But it was a bulkier object that my palm closed upon.

"My snuff-box, Paul," said M'Gullicuddy with emotion, "I shall not want it now. Keep it as a memento."

"A memento marry," I said sadly.

"Yes," said M'Gullicuddy. "It is the common fate. No man can escape. All right, Isabella, we 're off now. Well, good-bye, Paul. To think that my first wife was dead all along, and that if I had only read *The Macclesfield Courier* the Bachelors' Club would never have been! It was founded all in vain."

"All in vain!" I echoed with a sigh.

The driver clucked, the horse advanced his foreleg, and the President of the Bachelors' Club was whirled off towards Holland to marry his deceased wife's sister.

The snow fell. The cab became a frosted wedding-cake as it fleeted from my ken.

CHAPTER XIII.

LADY-DAY.

I DON'T think I mentioned what a charming woman the mother of the Graces is. She belongs, in a sense, to what plain, honest, mice-fearing ladies call the shrieking sisterhood, for she is a Blue Ribbonite, and speaks in public. This is not so bad as a Bluestocking, for although it seems to be agreed that a woman cannot know anything and yet be beautiful, there appears to be nothing in Temperance that is noxious to feminine charms. Charis, so I in my own mind think of the mother of the Graces, is a Juno-like woman, with a neck like one of the same goddess's swans. Her beautiful features are alive with intelligence and kindliness; her voice is soft and musical; her manners are sweet and perfect. She is the incarnation of all that is most adorable in woman. Her husband is a stockbroker. His only pleasure is in his wine-cellar, which is stocked with the finest vintages.

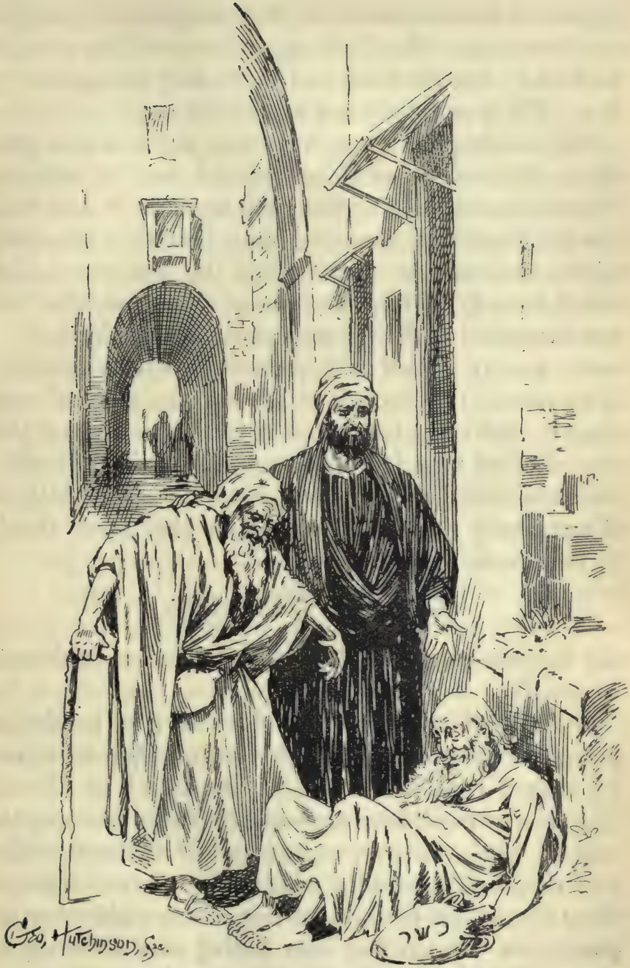
Daily contact with this charming lady had matured an idea engendered in my mind already at our second meeting. Charis could be made a force to raise and purify the standard of English humour. Her sweet and gracious life had hitherto illumined but a narrow circle; what if I made its beams co-extensive with the country? What nobler mission could a woman ask to be born for than to do such needed service to our decadent comic literature?

After the death of *At Home Every Monday* I had been gratified to receive from an old friend the offer of the editorship of a new comic paper he was projecting. It was to have an entirely original feature in the shape of jokes. This was the only condition the proprietor made; the rest was to be left entirely to my discretion. I had long ago analysed modern English humour, even as O'Roherty had analysed the modern English novel, though with more accuracy. Twenty per cent. of the stuff is of complex composition, embracing numerous ingredients, some of which would make even blue litmus-paper blush. The rest resolves itself simply into two great genera, technically called "Drunks" and "Mother-in-laws." There are sixty per cent. "Drunks" to twenty per cent. "Mother-in-laws," although the division is rather cross. Under "Drunks" are comprised numerous species, involving latchkeys, cabmen, lamp-posts, staircases, vigil-keeping wives, gutters, etc. Under "Mother-in-laws" are embraced every variety of connubial kill-joy, including even other women. It was obvious that in my comic paper these elements must be eschewed. But could I entirely eliminate them? They are so easily invented. I might be so easily tempted to put in one or the other as a fill-up. Besides, what rigid watchfulness would be required to keep them out of the contributors' copy! The thought of the Herculean task before me unnerved me. I was on the point of declining. Then I met Charis.

If I could prevail upon Charis to be my mother-in-law, I could edit this paper with a cheerful self-reliance. This pure and precious thing in mothers-in-law—this combination of the Temperance Oratress with the Angel—would effectually drive off all "Drunks" and "Mother-in-laws," as by centrifugal force. Apart from her dread criticism of such imbecilities after the fact, the thought of her sweet and gracious ways would inevitably keep them out in the first instance. I should be driven to insert real wit and humour. To have the conventional fatuities about mothers-in-law would not only be a libel on the kind, it would be an insult to my own. Considering that every man's mother is a potential mother-in-law, there seems to be something verging on filial disrespect in this constant chevying of legal maternity.

As for "Drunks," there can be no doubt that the good-humoured rollicking treatment of a bestial subject does much to perpetuate the evil. The drunkard is pictured as a comic personage instead of a disgusting animal. Charis was great on this. She said that the "Drunks," whatever disagreeable difficulties they depicted the drunkard in, never served as a moral deterrent to any one. No comic paper had ever lured one single bibulous being from the paths of adulterated alcohol. "Drunks," she had said from the platform, were like the intoxicated blackguard whom the good son of the Talmud, taking his father for a constitutional, pointed out to his vinous parent, as a scarecrow and a warning. The good-for-nothing Hebrew prodded the refuse of the roadway with his foot till the miserable creature rolled on his back and gaped. Then the father asked him where he got such good wine from.

Evidently, then, the salvation of English humour lay in securing Charis for a mother-in-law. Such an opportunity occurs but once in a generation. This godsend to *belles lettres* had fallen at my feet; was I to



ASKED HIM WHERE HE GOT SUCH GOOD WINE FROM.

turn away impiously? In my hands Charis had been appointed an instrument for the renaissance of English comic writing. Should I approve myself too weak to wield it? No, the hour had come, and the mother-in-law. The man should not lag behind.

The one drop of bitter in my cup was that this great thing—like all great things—could not be achieved without sacrifice. I should have to marry. And with me the President, Treasurer, and Secretary, the Committee, and all the members of the Bachelors' Club would have to marry. It was not a mere sacrifice that was demanded by the interests of art, but a holocaust. I could martyr myself with pleasure, but was I justified in sacrificing the Bachelors' Club on the altar of marriage? Did it not behove me to be all the stronger that the yoke had been left on my unaided neck? Should I not stand like a rocky pillar against the whole Atlantic of matrimony? Were it not better that there should be written on my tombstone:—

Impavidum ferient ruinæ?

Let English humour perish. The Bachelors' Club must be saved!

And yet there were other sides to this perplexing polygon. Why should the Bachelors' Club be wound up, even if I married? Could I not keep it up till such time as new candidates appeared? There was only the rent to pay—the waiters had sacked themselves like rats deserting a sinking ship. They never returned since I put them out on that memorable night when the great snow—which has been falling ever since—commenced to fall. And even if no fresh members ever appeared, the impression that it was a charity, perhaps a refuge for poor creatures who could not get wives, might gain ground. More donations might accrue, especially if the institution were judiciously advertised by misleading paragraphs in the newspapers, sanctimonious circulars and broadcast publication of the names of donors. Were there not many instances of similar charities? And do they not play a noble part in the economy of existence, fostering the higher feelings of our nature, and bringing opportunities for abnegation to our very doors? But for false beggars there would be little true charity in this world. The Bachelors' Club was a going concern; it would be sheer extravagance to wind it up if I married, especially as I should then want money. It might still go on of itself, and if it got good endowments it might loom large in men's eyes and make a brave show, though it had not a single member in the world. No, the Bachelors' Club need be no obstacle to my securing Charis. This settled, the advantages of matrimony rushed upon me in a cohort. I had always felt it hard to give away costly wedding-presents and get only miserable bits of wedding-cake. If I married I should reverse the sides of the bargain, and get the better of it. The money expended on presents would then only have been lying out at compound interest. It is so provoking to be fleeced by one's best friends. Lifelong celibacy would mean the entire loss of all these investments. It would never occur to these cooing couples to say: "Paul is going on a month's holiday; let us club together and give him a good send-off;" or, "Paul has cut a new tooth, let us give him a new umbrella, his present one is so bad and bulging." No, they would stick to my money and never say a word about it, unless I made a wedding-feast and invited them to send it back. If for nothing else but to annoy his friends, a man ought to marry.

Again, I am very fond of walking-tours in the country. But, as I have remarked before, done on foot they are tiresome and tedious. I have always envied the man who flew along on a bicycle while I was toiling footsore towards the mocking mile-post. But I have never ventured to bestride a bicycle. It is an animal that I hold in suspicion. It has no discipline, no steadiness; it reels to the right or the left, as though it were drunk, and lurches towards the gutter. It is a machine that can only be recommended to suicides. A tricycle I consider an unmanly and cowardly substitute. But if I could combine safety with temerity by using a sociable, one of the dearest dreams of my life would be realised, and walking-tours would be robbed of their thorn. Now you cannot divide a sociable with a man, because, like a tandem, it is so obvious a mask of cowardice. Two men might just as well ride two bicycles. No, it is only with a woman that one can share a sociable, for then it is a concession to her weakness, and the mark of a nature solicitous for others. Such a partner on protracted walking-tours can only be obtained by marriage.

Then there was the great snow. The downfall that had started in November, and had continued for three weeks, and was still going on, had been unprecedented. The oldest inhabitants of the English workhouses could not remember anything like it, though this may have been the fault of their ailing aged memories. The snow stood in heaps like the congealed waters of the

Red Sea; while the traffic passed through the middle, like the army of the Israelites. Millions of men found employment in shunting the snow towards the gutters and side-walks as soon as it fell. Architecture was reduced to a dead level of amorphous white, and the tons of snow on the roofs caved in numerous buildings. The world was one wide whirl of fleecy flakes, waltzing round to the music of the winds. It was a hard time for the poor, and for widows and orphans, whose mourning was quite blanched by the ceaseless snow. But everybody was happy though avalanches slid down the chimneys and put out the fires, and fountains percolated through the ceilings, and cascades poured from the tiles. Such a snow-storm had never happened before; the like of it had never been seen in the memory of Englishmen. Perhaps it was turned on for this occasion only. It might never happen again in the whole history of England; and if it did, every one had a chance of being the oldest inhabitant by that time. What a tale to tell in the dim years of the future, when posterity boasted of its snow-storms! How we would annihilate the miserable pretensions of our descendants when they boasted of the rigour of *their* winters! How we should recount it to our grandsons again and again; how we should freeze their young blood with the tale of the great snow! Why should I be debarred from this supreme enjoyment, in itself enough to counterpoise years of suffering? I had no grandchildren, nor was likely to have any at the rate I was going on. Decidedly I must marry and have grandchildren to whom to tell the tale of the great snow. And I must marry quickly, or else I might have to leave without seeing them.

Moreover, unless I married shortly I should probably never marry at all. A few days after I had concluded that my retirement need make no difference to the existence and prosperity of the Bachelors' Club, I received a lucrative offer for the transfer of our rooms. This decided me to drop the idea of keeping up the Club, especially as I was anxious to utilise my experiences of it in book-form, and the charity could always be continued under another name, and count even the readers of these lines among its donors. So I closed with the offer, though there was more in it than I bargained for. Too late I discovered that the Club apartments were to be converted into a newspaper office. In due course the editor of the *Matrimonial Noose* was installed in our sanctum; while the pernicious paper itself was published in the smoking-room, and the contents bills were posted over our maxims. But this by the way. To return to my marriage. If I published *The Bachelors' Club*, necessarily embodying so much misogyny and such fell high-treason to the Queen of Hearts, the odds were I should never get a wife. I did not want one at present, but who knew that I might not want one some day? Wives have many uses, as Bacon has pointed out. Was it wise, was it prudent to cut myself off from all chance of getting one? No; if I was ever to marry, it must be before the publication of *The Bachelors' Club.* And there was another consideration which limited my time of single blessedness still more straitly. Christmas was coming. If I married on Christmas Day a great economy of enjoyment would be effected. The Christmas party would do as the wedding party. It is such a bore to be jolly, and if you can kill two birds with one stone, proverbial sagacity recommends the massacre. The Christmas dinner would do for the wedding dinner also. Instead of the dietary fal-lals we should have wholesome roast beef and plum pudding. There was no time to lose. It is a matter of common remark that Christmas comes but once a year. By next Christmas my book would be published. Then the gate of matrimony would for ever be shut in my bachelor face, and to me, as to the equally foolish virgins, a voice would wail—

> "Too late, too late, you cannot enter now."

Besides, unless I married I should never be able to utilise that witty wedding-speech which I found among Mandeville Brown's manuscripts. The date of the wedding settled, the only problem now left was by which of Charis's daughters to become her son-in-law and save English humour. Maud, Alice, or Kitty,—each was as good as the other. Was there any way by which I could choose among them? It is always unpleasant to marry one out of several daughters, because it makes such invidious distinctions. This shows the advantages of polygamy over monogamy. The unpleasantness was increased for me by the fact that there was no reason why I should make any distinction at all. Tossing up suggested itself to me. But I am averse from gambling. For hours I was racked by doubt. Then I bethought myself that if I *was* to be martyred, I might as well make as good a thing out of it as any other martyr. Why not choose the girl who was best adapted to my idiosyncrasies?

The reader may have gathered from these records that I am one of those unfortunate persons who find it difficult to leave a room. When I pay a visit I never know when to go. The personal magnetism of the company draws me like a bit of steel. I cannot tear myself away. I sit listening and looking about me till I fancy my entertainers get annoyed. Half-a-dozen times I get up awkwardly to go away, but I sit down again without success. As a visitor, I have too much staying-power. Now if I could go out visiting with a companion who would always give me the cue when to go, who would take me away despite all my uneasy efforts to remain, this shadow on my life would be lifted. As I *was* to marry, I might as well marry a woman who would do this. I set myself to watch the three Graces carefully so as to ascertain which could leave a room quickest. It did not take me long to discover that it was Kitty. When I came into any room and she was there, she always left it quicker than any one else of the company. Kitty then must be my future mother-in-law's first married daughter.

I took an early opportunity of informing Kitty of the fact. I waylaid the bright, violet-eyed creature with the sunny hair and the dainty figure and the saucy tongue in a curtained niche of the ball-room, for no niveous deluge could give pause to the pleasures of Bayswater. She did not seem at all surprised, which surprised me; and she declined, which surprised me still more. She made the usual sororal protestations; but if she became my sister, Charis would have become my mother. And it was not a mother I was marrying for, but a mother-in-law. I had a mother. I had had one from my earliest infancy. I pressed Kitty for reasons, and she confessed with a pretty blush and a sigh that her heart was seared. I saw that she still cherished the memory of Mandeville Brown. I took her soft tiny hand and pressed it and my suit hard. As she stood there in all the flush of youth and insolent loveliness, with her heart beating quickly beneath her gauzy ball-dress, and the voluptuous music of the waltz swinging dreamily to and fro, I felt quite piqued by her refusal. As I looked into her beautiful eyes, I felt that I had been right in deciding upon marriage. It was well that English humour should be purified and elevated. High ideals in life and literature seemed easy to discern and to follow by the light of those violet orbs. All things fair and noble seemed fairer and nobler while I held her gentle fingers. It seemed to me as if the world would grow dark and my new paper would not contain jokes, if she took those dainty digits away. I felt that I should not even need to run a charity, if she only consented to become my mother-in-law's daughter. What mattered to me that she still thought of Mandeville Brown; that she loved the Bedlamite? I did not want her love, any more than she could have mine. She did not love me, true, but then I did not love her. Surely two negatives like that should result in an affirmative, when I made my proposal! But she still shook her head in a silence that was not consent. Her obstinacy was maddening me. The waltz swang on.

"And you are determined to ruin my life?" I whispered hoarsely, as I thought of the coming comic paper with its "drunks" and its "mother-in-laws."

"It is not my fault," she said plaintively, "I am sure I am very sorry. Please, let me go, the waltz is half over and my partner must be looking for me everywhere."

"Your partner stands here," I answered her, gripping her hand more fiercely. "Your partner for life."

"No, I cannot give you the whole programme," she rejoined resolutely.

"There must be some reason behind this—something you are hiding from me," I said bitterly. "You led me on to believe that you did not love me, and now you are throwing me over, as if that were a sufficient excuse. No, there is something else. Till you tell me what it is I will not let you go."

"Then I will tell you," she said. "You offer me your name and fortune. I do not object to the fortune. But the name I can never take. I do not mind the Paul—that is nice enough. But Pry! Become Mrs. Paul Pry, indeed! Ugh!"

"What is the matter with the name?" I asked hotly. "It is a lovely alliterative name, and this is the first time I have heard any one find fault with it."

"That may be," said the beautiful little minx, tossing her golden hair. "But I prefer my own."

"Oh, Kitty, that is such a nominal difficulty!" I cried.

"It is fatal," she said decisively. "So now you know. Cheer up. You 'll get over it."

"Never," I cried, as I thought of poor English humour.

"No?" she said, her violet eyes overbrimming with saucy light. "What will you do then?"

Her question restored me to myself. My duty faced me, cold and stern.

"I shall marry Maud or Alice," I said quietly.

Kitty flushed. "None of my sisters shall be Mrs. Pry," she said hotly and impulsively.

"Indeed?" I sneered. "We shall see." Her selfish indifference to the interests of English humour braced me to suffer and be strong

"Yes, we shall see," she flashed back, her lovely lips twitching. "It shall never be."

"Why, who will prevent it?" I said indignantly.

"I will," she said defiantly.

I laughed scornfully.

"You?" I said. "And how, pray?"

"I will become Mrs. Pry myself."

The ball-room swayed round me, as though it had joined in the waltz. The dreamy music sounded far-off, like the strains of some celestial melody. The blood coursed in delicious delirium through my veins. I caught the bewitching little beauty in my arms and kissed her. English humour would be safe after all. For the love of letters I kissed her thankfully again and again. My lips were grateful to her.

* * * * *

The proprietor of the proposed comic paper insisted on sitting next to us at supper, much to our annoyance, and told me he had given up the idea. All his friends had warned him that it would never do to give the public new jokes. That they would never recognise them. That they liked to see old friends, and never tired of "drunks" and "mother-in-laws." That if a man made a joke that tickled the public, he could make his fortune by repeating that joke for the rest of his life. That they would not let him do anything else; and that if he made another joke, his reputation as a humourist would be gone. That new jokes were like new men, it took them a long time to achieve recognition. That it was better to stick to the old jokes. And that he preferred dropping the idea to dropping a lot of coin over it. "Even this *Bachelors' Club* of yours," he said, 'will fall flat."

I said I would go through the manuscript carefully and cut out all the jokes, so that the critics might praise my artistic restraint, and the public buy my book. I also pointed out that, like many a greater fool, I relied largely on my title and that a book with such a title ought to go, even if it were worth reading; for it could not fail to excite the liveliest interest in matrimonial circles. I said that a faithful prosaic chronicle of facts always had a charm for the public as might be seen from the success of the *Police News* and the Stock Exchange Quotations. I admitted that the reasons which had induced my fellow-members to marry were rather commonplace. None of the Bachelors had a spark of the wild originality of the gentleman who advertised recently in a Mauritius paper as follows:—"A Stamp-collector, the possessor of a collection of 12,544 stamps, wishes to marry a lady who is an ardent collector, and the possessor of the blue penny stamp of Mauritius, issued in 1847." Still I ventured to think that ordinary as were the stories I had to tell, something was gained by sticking close to Truth in all its naked and unenamelled beauty.

And, pressing Kitty's hand to reassure myself that I did not intend to back out and blight her life now that English humour could not be saved after all, I added that I didn't care if *The Bachelors' Club* was a failure.

* * * * *

And now, as I sit on the last night of this strange and mournful year and gaze from the window of the Bournemouth hotel towards the sea that moans beneath, a phantasmagoria of recollections hovers in the cold starlight. My eyes fill with tears and Kitty's living face grows dim as those wed faces of my comrades gleam in the spectral air. One short year ago we sat all together in the Bachelors' Club, speeding the parting year with careless carousal and cynic chat—and now, we are scattered as leaves before the blast. How fast has brother followed brother from sunshine to the honeymoon land! Twelve brief months ago, all gay and healthy, in the pride of single life, and the flower of celibacy, and now we lie wed and married in the four corners of the earth—Henry Robinson in the snow-clad Sierras of South America, and Oliver Green in the torrid plains of India, and Israfel Mondego in the droughty deserts of Australia, and M'Gullicuddy beneath the red sunsets of Rotterdam. Poor President—thee I pity most, for surely no man was ever so sorely circumstanced as thou, M'Gullicuddy, with thy Macclesfield marriage.

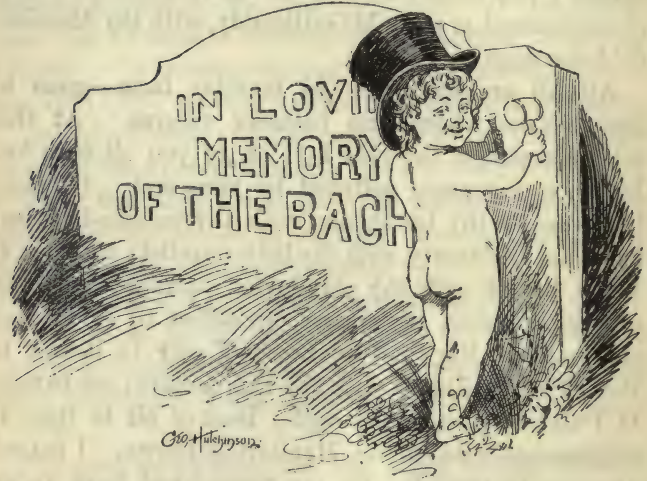
All, all are gone, the old familiar faces—gone to that bourne whence no bachelor returns. At this solemn season of the year I think of you all with forbearance, my anger softened by your end. Of thee, O Fogson, in thy farmhouse, with thy pseudo-Barbara; and thee, O'Roherty, with thy lady-novelist; and thee, O Little Bethel, with thy play-loving partner; and thee, O Dickray, with thy Jenny, ghostliest of brides and counsellors. Nor shall the throb of pity be denied to thee, O Fitz-Williams, with thy rich consort; nor to thee, O Twinkletop, with thy cook; least of all to thee, O epigrammatic Bedlamite, Mandeville Brown. I extend amnesty to you all. By my pious hand have ye all been preserved in memory on the funereal fresco, though for me there was none to perform the last sad offices. Yea, even to thee, Willoughby Jones, and to thee, O dusky steward, my soul goes out in silent sympathy. *Requiescatis omnes.* Towards the Club-rooms, too, I raise my hand in peaceful benediction, though they likewise are married, so to speak, and subserve base matrimonial operations.

All gone—vanished like last year's great snow.

Clash! clash! Ding! dong! The joy-bells usher in the New Year. Kitty's face is close to mine. Our tears mingle.

Farewell, farewell, O boon companions, farewell—a last, sad farewell.

Marriendum est omnibus.



THE OLD MAIDS' CLUB

WITH FORTY-FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS BY F. H. TOWNSEND

INTRODUCTION

THE READER	*MY BOOK*
MY BOOK	*THE READER*

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CHAPTER I

THE ALGEBRA OF LOVE *PLUS* OTHER THINGS

THE OLD MAIDS' CLUB was founded by Lillie Dulcimer in her sweet seventeenth year. She had always been precocious, and could analyse her own sensations before she could spell. In fact, she divided her time between making sensations and analysing them. She never spoke early English—the dialect which so enraged Dr. Johnson—but, like John Stuart Mill, she wrote a classical style from childhood. She kept a diary, not necessarily as a guarantee of good faith, but for publication only. It was labelled "Lillie Day by Day," and was posted up from her fifth year. Judging by the analogy of the rest, one might construct the entry for the first day of her life. If she had been able to record her thoughts, her diary would probably have begun thus:—

Sunday, September 3rd.—My birthday. Wept at the sight of the world in which I was to be so miserable. The atmosphere was so stuffy—not at all pleasing to the æsthetic faculties. Expected a more refined reception. A lady, to whom I had never been introduced, fondled me and addressed me as "Petsie-tootsie-wootsie." It appears that she is my mother, but this hardly justifies her in degrading the language of Milton and Shakespeare. Later on a man came in and kissed her. I could not help thinking that they might respect my presence. I understood later that I must call the stranger "Poppy," and that I was not to resent his familiarities, as he was very much attached to my mother by Act of Parliament. Both the man and the woman seem to arrogate to themselves a certain authority over me. How strange that two persons you have never seen before in your life should claim such rights of interference! There must be something rotten in the constitution of society. It shall be one of my life-tasks to discover what it is. I made a light lunch off milk, but do not care for the beverage. The day passed slowly. I was dreadfully bored by the conversation in the room—it was so petty. I was glad when night came. Oh, the intolerable *ennui* of an English Sunday! I divine already that I am destined to go through life perpetually craving for I know not what, and that I shan't be happy till I get it.

Lillie was a born heroine, being young and beautiful from her birth. In her fourth year she conceived a Platonic affection for the boy who brought the telegrams. His manners had such repose. This was followed by a hopeless passion for a French cavalry officer with spurs. Every one feared she would grow up to be a suicide or a poetess; for her earliest nursery rhyme was an impromptu distich discovered by the nursery-maid, running:

Woonded i crawl out from the battel,
Life is as hollo as my rattel.

And her twelfth year was almost entirely devoted to literary composition of a hopeless character, so far as publishers were concerned. It was only the success of *Woman as a Waste Force*, in her fourteenth year, that induced them to compete for her early manuscripts, and to give the world the celebrated compilations, *Ibsen for Infants*, *Browning for Babies*, *Carlyle for the Cradle*, *Newman for the Nursery*, *Leopardi for the Little Ones*, and *The Schoolgirl's Schopenhauer*, which, together with *Tracts for the Tots*, make up the main productions of her First Period.

After the loss of the French cavalry officer she remained *blasée* till she was more than seven, when her second grand passion took her. It was a very grand passion indeed this time—and it lasted a full week. These things did not matter while Lillie had not yet arrived at years of indiscretion; but when she got into her teens, her father began to look about for a husband for her. He was a millionaire, and had always kept her supplied with every luxury. But Lillie did not care for her father's selections, and sent them all away with fleas in their ears instead of kind words. And her father was as unhappy as his selections. In her sixteenth year, her mother, who had been ailing for sixteen years, breathed her last, and Lillie more freely. She had grown quite to like Mrs. Dulcimer, which prevented her having her own way. The situation was now very simple. Mr. Dulcimer managed his immense affairs, and Lillie managed Mr. Dulcimer.

He made one last effort to get her to manage another man. He discovered a young nobleman who seemed fond of her society, and who was in the habit of meeting her accidentally at the Academy. The gunpowder being thus presumably laid, he set to work to strike the match. But the explosion was not such as he expected. Lillie told him that no man was further from her thoughts as a possible husband.

"But, Lillie," pleaded the millionaire, "not one of the objections you have impressed upon me applies to Lord Silverdale. He is young, rich, handsome——"

"Yes, yes, yes," answered Lillie, "I know."

"He is rich, and cannot be after your money."

"True."

"He has a title, which you consider an advantage."

"I do."

"He is a man of taste and culture."

"He is."

"Well, what is it you don't like? Doesn't he ride or dance well?"

"He dances like an angel, and rides like the devil."

"Well, what in the name of angels or devils is your objection, then?"

"Father," said Lillie very solemnly, "he is all you claim, but——" The little delicate cheek flushed modestly. She could not say it.

"But——" said the millionaire impatiently.

Lillie hid her face in her hands.

"But——" said the millionaire brutally.

"But I love him!"

"You what?" roared the millionaire.

"Yes, father; do not be angry with me. I love him dearly. Oh, do not spurn me from you, but I love him with my whole heart and soul, and I shall never marry any other man but him." The poor little girl burst into a paroxysm of weeping.

"Then you *will* marry him?" gasped the millionaire.

"No, father," she sobbed solemnly, "that is an illegitimate deduction from my proposition. He is the one man on this earth I could never bring myself to marry."

"You are mad!"

"No, father. I am only mathematical. I will never marry a man who does not love me. And don't you see that, as I love him, the odds are that he doesn't love me?"

"But he tells me he does!"

"What is his bare assertion—weighed against the doctrine of probability? How many girls do you suppose Silverdale has met in his varied career?"

"A thousand, I daresay."

"Ah, that's only reckoning English society (and theatres). And then he has seen society (and theatres) in Paris, Berlin, Rome, Boston, a hundred places! If we put the figure at three thousand it will be moderate. Here am I, a single girl——"

"Who oughtn't to remain so," growled the millionaire.

"One single girl. How wildly improbable that out of three thousand girls, Silverdale should just fall in love with me! It is 2999 to one against. Then there is the probability that he is not in love at all—which makes the odds 5998 to one. The problem is exactly analogous to one which you will find in any Algebra. Out of a sack containing three thousand coins, what is the odds that a man will draw the one marked coin?"

"The comparison of yourself to a marked coin is correct enough," said the millionaire, thinking of the files of fortune-hunters to whom he had given the sack. "Otherwise you are talking nonsense."

"Then Pascal, Laplace, Lagrange, De Moivre talked nonsense," said Lillie hotly; "but I have not finished. We must also leave open the possibility that the man will not be tempted to draw out any coin whatsoever. The odds against the marked coin being drawn out are thus 5998 to one. The odds against Silverdale returning my affection are 5998 to one. As Butler rightly points out, probability is the only guide to conduct, which is, we know from Matthew Arnold, three-fourths of life. Am I to risk ruining three-fourths of my life, in defiance of the unerring dogmas of the *Doctrine of Chances?* No, father, do not exact this sacrifice from me. Ask me anything you please, and I will grant it—oh, so gladly! But do not, oh do not, ask me to marry the man I love!"

The millionaire stroked her hair and soothed her in piteous silence. He had made his pile in pig-iron, and had not science enough to grapple with the situation.

"Do you mean to say," he said at last, "that because you love a man, he can't love you?"

"He can. But in all human probability he won't. Supposing you put on a fur waistcoat, and went out into the street, determined to invite to dinner the first man in a straw hat, and supposing he replied that you had just forestalled him, as he had gone out with a similar intention to look for the first man in a fur waistcoat, what would you say?"

The millionaire hesitated. "Well, I shouldn't like to insult the man," he said slowly.

"You see!" said Lillie triumphantly.

"Well, then, dear," said he, after much pondering, "the only thing for it is to marry a man you *don't* love."

"Father!" said Lillie, in terrible tones.

The millionaire hung his head shamefacedly at the outrage his suggestion had put upon his daughter.

"Forgive me, Lillie," he said. "I shall never interfere again in your matrimonial concerns."

So Lillie wiped her eyes, and founded the Old Maids' Club.

She said it was one of her matrimonial concerns, and so her father could not break his word, though an entire suite of rooms in his own Kensington mansion was set aside for the rooms of the Club. Not that he desired to interfere. Having read *The Bachelors' Club*, he thought it was the surest way of getting her married.

The object of the Club was defined by the foundress as "the depolarisation of the term 'Old Maid'; in other words, the dissipation of all those disagreeable associations which have gradually and most unjustly clustered about it, the restoration of the homely Saxon phrase to its pristine purity, and the elevation of the enviable class denoted by it to their due pedestal of privilege and homage."

The conditions of membership, drawn up by Lillie, were:—

1. Every candidate must be under twenty-five. 2. Every candidate must be beautiful and wealthy, and undertake to continue so. 3. Every candidate must have refused at least one advantageous offer of marriage.

The *rationale* of these rules was obvious. Disappointed, soured failures were not wanted. There was no virtue in being an Old Maid when you had passed twenty-five. Such creatures are merely old maids—Old Maids (with capitals) were required to be in the flower of youth and the flush of beauty. Their anti-matrimonial motives must be above suspicion. They must despise and reject the married state though they would be welcomed therein with open arms. Only thus would people's minds be disabused of the old-fashioned notions about old maids. The Old Maids were expected to obey an elaborate array of by-laws, and respect a series of recommendations.

According to the by-laws they were required—

1. To regard all men as brothers. 2. Not to keep cats, lap-dogs, parrots, pages, or other domestic pets. 3. Not to have less than one birthday per year. 4. To abjure medicine, art classes, and the confessional. 5. Never to speak to a curate. 6. Not to have any fads or to

take part in woman's rights movements, charity concerts, or other platform demonstrations. 7. Not to wear caps, curls, or similar articles of attire. 8. Not to kiss females.

In addition to these were the general recommendations:—Never refuse the last slice of bread, etc., lest you be accused of dreading celibacy. Never accept bits of wedding cake, lest you be suspected of putting them under your pillow. Do not express disapproval by a sniff. In travelling, choose smoking carriages; pack your umbrellas and parasols inside your trunk. Never distribute tracts. Always fondle children, and show marked hostility to the household cat. Avoid eccentricities. Do not patronise Dorothy Restaurants or the establishments of the Aerated Bread Company. Never drink cocoa-nibs. In dress it is better to avoid mittens, crossovers, fleecy shawls, elastic-side boots, white stockings, black silk bodices with pendent gold chains, and antique white lace collars. One-button white kid gloves are also inadvisable for afternoon concerts. Nor should any glove be worn with fingers too long to pick up change at booking offices. Parcels should not be wrapped in whitey-brown paper, and not more than three should be carried at once. Watch-pockets should not be hung over the bed. Sheets and mattresses should be left to the servants to air, and rooms should be kept in an untidy condition. Refrain from manufacturing jam, household remedies, gossip or gooseberry wine. Never nurse a cold or a relative. It is advisable not to have a married sister, as she might decease, and the temptation to marry her husband is such as no mere human being ought to be exposed to. For cognate reasons, eschew friendship with cripples and hunchbacks (especially when they have mastered the violin in twelve lessons), men of no moral character, drunkards who wish to reform themselves, very ugly men, and husbands with wives in lunatic asylums. Cultivate rather the acquaintance of handsome young men (who have been duly vaccinated), for this species is too conceited to be dangerous.

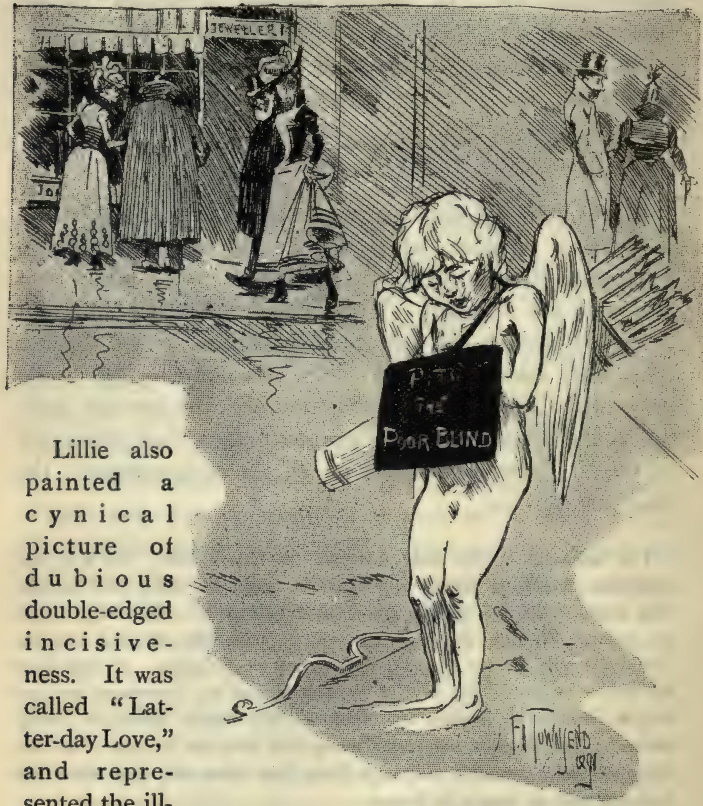
On the same principle were the rules for admitting visitors :—

1. No unmarried lady admitted. 2. No married gentleman admitted.

If they admitted single ladies there would be no privilege in being a member, while if they did not admit single gentlemen they might be taunted with being afraid that they were not fireproof. When Lillie had worked this out to her satisfaction, she was greatly chagrined to find the two rules were the same as for "The Bachelors' Club." To show their Club had no connection with the brother institution, she devised a series of counterblasts to their misogynic maxims. These were woven on all the antimacassars; the deadliest were :—

The husband is the only creature entirely selfish. He is a low organism, consisting mainly of a digestive apparatus and a rude mouth. The lover holds the cloak; the husband drops it. Wedding dresses are webs. Women like clinging robes; men like clinging women. The lover will always help the beloved to be helpless. A man likes his wife to be just clever enough to comprehend his cleverness and just stupid enough to admire it. Women who catch husbands rarely recover. Marriage is a lottery; every wife does not become a widow. Wrinkles are woman's marriage lines, but when she gets them her husband will no longer be bound.

The woman who believes her husband loves her, is capable of believing that she loves him. A good man's love is the most intolerable of boredoms. A man often marries a woman because they have the same tastes and prefer himself to the rest of creation. If a woman could know what her lover really thought of her, she would know what to think of him. Possession is nine points of the marriage law. It is impossible for a man to marry a clever woman. Marriages are made in heaven, but old maids go there.



LATTER-DAY LOVE.

Lillie also painted a cynical picture of dubious double-edged incisiveness. It was called "Latter-day Love," and represented the ill-hap of Cupid, neglected and superfluous, his quiver full, his arrows rusty, shivering with the cold, amid contented couples passing him by with never an eye for the lugubrious legend, "Pity the poor blind."

The picture put the finishing touch to the rooms of the Club. When Lillie Dulcimer had hung it up, she looked round upon the antimacassars and felt a proud and happy girl.

The Old Maids' Club was now complete. Nothing was wanting except members.

CHAPTER II

THE HONORARY TRIER

LORD SILVERDALE was the first visitor to the Old Maids' Club. He found the fair President throned alone among the epigrammatic antimacassars. Lillie received him with dignity, and informed him that he stood on holy ground. The young man was shocked to hear of the change in her condition. He, himself, had lately spent his time in plucking up courage to ask her to change it—and now he had been forestalled.

"But you must come in and see us often," said Lillie. "It occurs to me that the by-laws admit you."

"How many will you be?" murmured Silverdale, heartbroken.

"I don't know yet. I am waiting for the thing to get about. I have been in communication with the first candidate, and expect her any moment. She is a celebrated actress."

"And who elects her?"

"I, of course!" said Lillie, with an imperial flash in her passionate brown eyes. She was a brunette, and her face sometimes looked like a handsome thundercloud. "I am the President and the Committee, and the oldest Old Maid. Isn't one of the rules that candidates shall not believe in woman's rights? None of the members will have any voice whatever."

"Well, if your actress is a comic opera star, she *won't* have any voice whatever."

"Lord Silverdale," said Lillie sharply, "I hate puns. They spoiled the Bachelors' Club."

His lordship, who was the greatest punster of the peers, and the peer of the greatest punsters, muttered savagely that he would like to spoil the Old Maids' Club. Lillie punned herself sometimes, but he dared not tell her of it.

"And what will be the subscription?" he said aloud.

"There will be none. I supply the premises."

"Ah, that will never do. Half the pleasure of belonging to a club is the feeling that you have not paid your subscription. And how about grub?"

"Grub! We are not men. We do not fulfil missions by eating."

"Unjust creature! Men sometimes fulfil missions by being eaten."

"Well, papa will supply buns, lemonade, and ices. Turple the Magnificent, as you call him, will always be within hail to hand round the things."

"May I send you in a cwt. of chocolate creams?"

"Certainly. Why should weddings have a monopoly of presents? This is not the only way in which you can be of service to me, if you will."

"Only discover it for me, my dear Miss Dulcimer. Where there's a way there's a will."

"Well, I should like you to act as trier."

"Eh! I beg your pardon?"

"Don't apologise; to try the candidates who wish to be Old Maids."

"Try them? No, no. I'm afraid I should be prejudiced against bringing them in innocent."

"Don't be silly. You know what I mean. I could not tell so well as you whether they possessed the true apostolic spirit. You are a man—your instinct would be truer than mine. Whenever a new candidate applies, I want you to come up and see her."

"Really, Miss Dulcimer, I—I can't tell by looking at her!"

"No, but you can by her looking at you."

"You exaggerate my insight."

"Not at all. It is most important that something of the kind should be done. By the rules, all the Old Maids must be young and beautiful. And it requires a high degree of will and intelligence——"

"To be both?"

"For such to give themselves body and soul to the Cause. Every Old Maid is double-faced till she has been proved single-hearted."

"And must I talk to them?"

"In plain English——"

"It's the only language I speak plainly."

"Wait till I finish, boy! In plain English, you must flirt with them."

"Flirt?" said Silverdale, aghast. "What! With young and beautiful girls?"

"I know it is hard, Lord Silverdale, but you will do it for my sake?" They were sitting on an ottoman, and the lovely face which looked pleadingly up into his was very near. The young man got up and walked up and down.

"Hang it!" he murmured disconsolately. "Can't you try them on Turple the Magnificent? Or why not get a music-master or a professor of painting?"

"Music-masters touch the wrong chord, and professors of painting are mostly old masters. You are young and polished, and can flirt with tact and taste."

"Thank you," said the poor young peer, making a wry face. "And therefore I'm to be a flirtation machine?"

"An electric battery if you like. I don't desire to mince my words. There's no gain in not calling a spade a spade."

"And less in people calling a battery a rake."

"Is that a joke? I thought you clubmen enjoyed being called rakes?"

"That is all most of us do enjoy. Take it from me that the last thing a rake does is to sow wild oats."

"I know enough of agriculture not to be indebted to you for the information. But I certainly thought you were a rake," said the little girl, looking up at him with limpid brown eyes.

"You flatter me," he said, with a mock bow, "you are young enough to know better."

"But you have seen society (and theatres) in a dozen capitals?"

"I have been behind the scenes of both," he answered simply. "That is the thing to keep a man steady."

"I thought it turned a man's head," she said musingly.

"It does. Only one begins manhood with his head screwed the wrong way on. Homœopathy is the sole curative principle in morals. Excuse this sudden discharge of copy-book mottoes. I sometimes go off that way, but you musn't take me for a Maxim gun. I am not such a bore, I hope."

Lillie flew off at a feminine tangent.

"All of which only proves the wisdom of my choice in selecting you."

"What! To pepper them with pellets of platitude?" he said, dropping despairingly into an arm-chair.

"TAKE CARE, YOU'RE SITTING ON AN EPIGRAM!"

"No. With eyeshot. Take care!"

"What's the matter?"

"You're sitting on an epigram." The young man started as if stung, and removed the antimacassar, without however seeing the point.

"I hope you didn't mind my inquiring whether you have any morals?" said Lillie.

"I have as many as Æsop; the strictest investigation courted; references given and exchanged," said the peer lightly.

"Do be serious. You know I have an insatiable curiosity to know everything about everything—to feel all sensations, think all thoughts. That is the note of my being." The brown eyes had an eager, wistful look.

"Oh yes—a note of interrogation."

"Oh that I were a man! What *do* men think?"

"What do *you* think? Men are human beings first, and masculine afterwards. And I think everybody is like a suburban assembly hall — to-day a temperance lecture, to-morrow a dance, next day an oratorio, then a farcical comedy, and on Sunday a religious service. But about this appointment?"

"Well, let us settle it one way or another," Lillie said. "Here is my proposal——"

"I have an alternative proposal," he said desperately.

"I cannot listen to any other. Will you, or will you not, become Honorary Trier of the Old Maids' Club?"

"I'll try," he said at last.

"Yes or no?"

"Shall you be present at the trials?"

"Certainly; but I shall cultivate myopia."

"It's a short-sighted policy, Miss Dulcimer. Still, sustained by your presence, I feel I could flirt with the most beautiful and charming girl in the world. I could do it, even unsustained by the presence of the other girl."

"Oh no! You must not flirt with me. I am the only Old Maid with whom flirtation is absolutely taboo."

"Then I consent," said Silverdale, with apparent irrelevance. And, seating himself on the piano-stool, after carefully removing an epigram from the top of the instrument, he picked out "The Last Rose of Summer" with a facile forefinger.

"Don't!" said Lillie. "Stick to your lute."

Thus admonished, the nobleman took down Lillie's banjo which was hanging on the wall, and struck a few passionate chords.

"Do you know," he said, "I always look on the banjo as the American among musical instruments? It is the guitar with a twang. Wasn't it invented in the States? Anyhow, it is the most appropriate instrument to which to sing you my Fin de Siècle Love Song."

"For Heaven's sake, don't use that poor overworked phrase!"

"Why not? It has only a few years to live. List to my sonnet."

So saying, he strummed the strings and sang in an aristocratic baritone :—

AD CHLOEN—A VALEDICTORY

O Chloe, you are very, very dear,
  And far above your rivals in the town,
  Who all in vain essay to beat you down,
Embittered by your haughtiness austere.
Too high you are for lowly me, I fear.
  You would not stoop to pick up e'en a crown,
  Nor cede the slightest lowering of a gown,
Though in men's eyes far fairer to appear.

With this my message, kindly current go,
  At halfpenny per word—it should be less—
  To Chloe, telegraphical address
  (Thus written to economise two-*d.*)
Of Messrs. Robinson, De Vere & Co.,
  Costumers, 90, Ludgate Hill, E.C.

Lillie laughed. "My actress's name is something like Chloe. It is Clorinda—Clorinda Bell. She tells me she is very celebrated."

"Oh yes, I've heard of her," he said.

"There is a sneer in your tones. Have you heard anything to her disadvantage?"

"Only that she is virtuous and in society."

"The very woman for an Old Maid! She is beautiful, too."

"Is she? I thought she was one of those actresses who reserve their beauty for the stage."

"Oh no. She always wears it. Here is her photograph. Isn't that a lovely face?"

"It is a lovely photograph. Does she hope to achieve recognition by it, I wonder?"

"Sceptic!"

"I doubt all charms but yours."

"Well, you shall see her."

"All right; but mention her name clearly when you introduce me. Women are such changing creatures—to-day pretty, to-morrow plain, yesterday ugly. I have to be reintroduced to most of my female acquaintances three times a week. May I wait to see Clorinda?"

"No, not to-day. She has to undergo the preliminary exam. Perhaps she may not even matriculate. Where you come in, is at the graduation stage."

"I see. To pass them as Bachelors—I mean Old Maids. I say, how will you get them to wear stuff gowns?"

The bell rang loudly. "That may be she. Good-bye, Lord Silverdale. Remember you are Honorary Trier of the Old Maids' Club, and don't forget those chocolate creams."

CHAPTER III

THE MAN IN THE IRONED MASK

THE episode that turned Clorinda Bell's thoughts in the direction of Old Maidenhood was not wanting in strangeness. She was an actress of whom everybody spoke well—excepting actresses. This was because she was so respectable. Respectability is all very well for persons who possess no other ability; but Bohemians rightly feel that genius should be above that sort of thing. Clorinda never went anywhere without her mother. This lady—a portly taciturn dame, whose hair had felt the snows of sixty winters—was as much a part of her as a thorn is of a rose. She accompanied her always—except when she was singing—and loomed like some more substantial shadow before or behind her at balls and receptions, at concerts and operas, private views and church bazaars. Her mother was always with her behind the scenes. She helped her to make up and to unmake. She became the St. Peter of the dressing-room in her absence. At the Green Room Club they will tell you how a royal personage, asking permission to come and congratulate her, received the answer: "I shall be most honoured—in the presence of my mother."

There were those who wished Clorinda had been born an orphan.

But the graver sort held Miss Bell up as a typical harbinger of the new era, when actresses would keep mothers instead of dog-carts. There was no intrinsic reason, they said, why actresses should not be received at Court, and visit the homes of the poor. Clorinda was very charming. She was tall and fair as a lily, with dashes of colour stolen from the rose and the daffodil, for her eyes had a sparkle and her cheeks a flush, and her hair was usually golden. Not the least of her physical charms was the fact that she had numerous admirers. But it was understood that she kept them at a distance and that they worshipped there. The Society journals, to which Clorinda was indebted for considerable information about herself, often stated that she intended to enter a convent, as her higher nature found scant satisfaction in stage triumphs, and she had refused to exchange her hand either for a coronet or a pile of dollars. They frequently stated the opposite, but a Society journal cannot always be contradicting a contemporary. It must sometimes contradict itself as a proof of impartiality. Clorinda let all these rumours surge about her unheeded, and her managers had to pay for the advertisement. The money came back to them, though, for Clorinda was a sure draw. She brought the odour of sanctity over the footlights, and people have almost as much curiosity to see a saint as a sinner—especially when the saint is beautiful.

Gentlemen in particular paid frequent pilgrimages to the shrine of the saint, and adored her from the ten-and-sixpenny pews. There was at this period a noteworthy figure in London dress-circles and stalls, an inveterate first-nighter, whose identity was the subject of considerable speculation. He was a mystery in a swallow-tail coat. No one had ever seen him out of it. He seemed to go through life armed with a white breastplate, starched shot-proof and dazzling as a grenadier's cuirass. What wonder that a wit (who had become a dramatic critic through drink) called him "The Man in the Ironed Mask!" Between the acts he wore a cloak, a crush-hat, and a cigarette. Nobody ever spoke to him, nor did he ever reply. He could not be dumb, because he had been heard to murmur, "Brava, bravissima," in a soft but incorrect foreign manner. He was very handsome, with a high white forehead of the Gothic order of architecture, and dark Moorish eyes. Nobody even knew his name, for he went to the play quite anonymously. The pit took him for a critic, and the critics for a minor poet. He had appeared on the scene (or before it) only twelve months ago, but already he was a distinguished man. Even the actors and actresses had come to hear of him, and not a few had peeped at him between their speeches. He was certainly a sight for the "gods."

Latterly he had taken to frequenting the *Lymarket*, where Miss Clorinda Bell was "starring" for a season of legitimate drama. It was the only kind the scrupulous actress would play in. Whenever there was no first night on anywhere else, he went to see Clorinda. Only a few rivals and the company knew of his constancy to the entertainment. Clorinda was, it will be remembered, one of the company.

It was the *entr'acte*, and the orchestra was playing a gavotte, to which the eighteenth-century figures on the drop-scene were dancing. The Man in the Ironed Mask strolled in the lobby among the critics, overhearing the views they were not going to express in print. Clorinda Bell's mother was brushing her child's magnificent hair into a more tragical attitude in view of the fifth act. The little room was sacred to the "star," the desire of so many moths. Neither maid nor dresser entered it, for Mrs. Bell was as devoted to her daughter as her daughter to her, and tended her as zealously as if she were a stranger.

"Yes, but why doesn't he speak?" said Clorinda.

"You haven't given him a chance, darling," said her mother.

"Nonsense—there is the language of flowers. All my lovers commence by talking that."

"You get so many bouquets, dear. It may be—as you say his appearance is so distinguished—that he dislikes so commonplace a method."

"Well, if he doesn't want to throw his love at my feet, he might have tried to send it me in a billet-doux."

"That also is commonplace. Besides, he may know that all your letters are delivered to me and opened by me. The fact has often enough appeared in print."

"Ah yes; but genius will find out a way. You remember Lieutenant Campbell, who was so hit the moment he saw me as Perdita, that he went across the road to the telegraph office, and wired, 'Meet me at supper, top floor, Piccadilly Restaurant, 11.15,' so that the doorkeeper sent the message direct to the prompter, who gave it me as I came off with Florizel and Camilla. That is the sort of man I admire!"

"But you soon tired of him, darling."

"O mother! How can you say so? I loved him the whole run of the piece."

"Yes, dear, but it was only Shakespeare."

"Would you have love a burlesque? 'A Winter's Tale' is long enough for any flirtation. Let me see, was it Campbell or Belfort who shot himself? I for—oh! oh! that hair-pin is irritating me, mother."

"There! there! Is that easier?"

"Thanks! There's only the Man in the Ironed Mask irritating me now. His dumb admiration provokes me."

"But you provoke his dumb admiration. And are you sure it is admiration?"

"People don't go to see Shakespeare seventeen times. I wonder who he is—an Italian count most likely. Ah, how his teeth flash beneath his moustache!"

"You make me feel quite curious about him. Do you think I could peep at him from the wing?"

"No, mother, you shall not be put to the inconvenience. It would give you a crick in your neck. If you desire to see him, I will send for him."

"Very well, dear," said the older woman submissively, for she was accustomed to the gratification of her daughter's whims.

So, when the Man in the Ironed Mask resumed his seat, a programme girl slipped a note into his hand. He read it, his face impassive as his ironed mask. When the play was over, he sauntered round to the squalid court in which the stage door was located, and stalked nonchalantly up the stairs. The doorkeeper was too impressed by his air not to take him for granted. He seemed to go on instinctively till he arrived at a door, placarded "Miss Clorinda Bell—Private."

He knocked, and the silvery accents he had been listening to all the evening bade him come in. The beautiful Clorinda, clad in diaphanous white, and radiating perfumes, received him with an intoxicating smile.

"It is so kind of you to come and see me," she said.

He made a stately inclination. "The obligation is mine," he said. "I am greatly interested in the drama. This is the seventeenth time I have come to see you."

"I meant here," she said, piqued, though the smile stayed on.

"Oh, but I understood——" His eyes wandered interrogatively about the room.

"Yes, I know; my mother is out," she replied. "She is on the stage picking up the bouquets. I believe she sent you a note. I do not know why she wants to see you, but she will be back soon. If you do not mind being left alone with me——"

"Pray do not apologise, Miss Bell," he said considerately.

"It is so good of you to say so. Won't you sit down?"

The Man in the Ironed Mask sat down beside the dazzling Clorinda and stared expectantly at the door. There was a tense silence. His cloak hung negligently upon his shoulders. He held his crush hat calmly in his hand.

Clorinda was highly chagrined. She felt as if she could slap his face and kiss the place to make it well.

"Did you like the play?" she said at last.

He elevated his dark eyebrows. "Is it not obvious?"

"Not entirely. You might come to see the players."

"Quite so, quite so."

He leaned his handsome head on his arm and looked pensively at the floor. It was some moments before he broke the silence again. But it was only by rising to his feet.

He walked towards the door. "I am sorry I cannot stay any longer," he said.

"Oh no! You mustn't go without seeing my mother. She will be terribly disappointed."

"Not less so than myself at missing her. Good-night, Miss Bell." He made his prim, courtly bow.

"Oh, but you must see her! Come again to-morrow night, anyhow," exclaimed Clorinda desperately. And when his footsteps had died away down the stairs, she could not repress several tears of vexation. Then she looked hurriedly into her mirror, and marvelled silently.

"Is he gone already?" said her mother, entering after knocking cautiously at the door.

"Yes; he is insane."

"Madly in love with you?"

"Madly out of love with me."

He came again the next night, stolid and courteous. To

Clorinda's infinite regret, her mother had been taken ill, and had gone home early in the carriage. It was raining hard. Clorinda would be reduced to a hansom.

"They call it the London gondola," she said, "but it is least comfortable when there's most water. You have to be framed in like a cucumber in a hot-house."

"Indeed! Personally I never travel in hansoms. And from what you tell me I should not like to make the experiment to-night. Good-bye, Miss Bell; present my regrets to your mother."

"Deuce take the donkey! He might at least offer me a seat in his carriage," thought Clorinda. Aloud she said, "Under these circumstances, may I venture to ask you to see my mother at the house? Here is our private address. Won't you come to tea to-morrow?"

He took the card, bowed silently and withdrew.

In such wise the courtship proceeded for some weeks, the invalid being confined to her room at tea-time, and occupied in picking up bouquets by night. He always came to tea in his cloak, and wore his Ironed Mask, and was extremely solicitous about Clorinda's mother. It became evident that so long as he had the ghost of an excuse for talking of the absent, he would never talk of Clorinda herself. At last she was reduced to intimating that she would be found at the *matinée* of a new piece next day (to be given at the theatre by a *débutante*), and that there would be plenty of room in her box. Clorinda was determined to eliminate her mother, who was now become an impediment instead of a pretext.

But when the afternoon came, she looked for him in vain. She chatted lightly with the acting-manager, who was lounging in the vestibule, but her eye was scanning the horizon feverishly.

"Is this woman going to be a success?" she asked.

"Oh yes," said the acting-manager promptly.

"How do you know?"

"I JUST SAW THE FLOWERS DRIVE UP."

"I just saw the flowers drive up."

Clorinda laughed. "What's the piece like?"

"I only saw one rehearsal. It seemed great twaddle.

But the low com. has got a good catchword, so there's some chance of its going into the evening bills."

"Oh, by the way, have you seen anything of that—that —the Man in the Ironed Mask, I think they call him?"

"Do you mean here—this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"No. Do you expect him?"

"Oh no, but I was wondering if he would turn up. I hear he is so fond of this theatre."

"Bless your soul, he'd never be seen at a *matinée!*"

"Why not?" asked Clorinda, her heart fluttering violently.

"Because he'd have to be in morning dress," said the acting-manager, laughing heartily.

To Clorinda his innocent merriment seemed the laughter of a mocking fiend. She turned away, sick at heart.

There was nothing for it but to propose outright at tea-time. Clorinda did so, and was accepted without further difficulty.

"And now, dearest," she said, after she had been allowed to press the first kiss of troth upon his coy lips, "I should like to know who I am going to be?"

"Clorinda Bell, of course," he said. "That is the advantage actresses have. They need not take their husband's name in vain."

"Yes, but what am *I* to call you, dearest?"

"Dearest!" he echoed enigmatically. "Let me be dearest—for a little while."

She forbore to press him further. For the moment it was enough to have won him. The sweetness of that soothed her wounded vanity at his indifference to the prize coveted by men and convents. Enough that she was to be mated to a great man, whose speech and silence alike bore the stamp of individuality.

"Dearest be it," she answered, looking fondly into his Moorish eyes. "Dearest! dearest!"

"Thank you, Clorinda. And now, may I see your mother? I have never learned what she has to say to me."

"What does it matter now, dearest?"

"More than ever," he said gravely, "now she is to be my mother-in-law."

Clorinda bit her lip at the dignified rebuke, and rang for his mother-in-law elect, who came from the sick-room in her bonnet.

"Mother," she said, as the good dame sailed through the door, "let me introduce you to my future husband."

The old lady's face lit up with surprise and excitement. She stood still for an instant, taking in the relationship so suddenly sprung upon her. Then she darted with open arms towards the Man in the Ironed Mask, and strained his mask to her bosom.

"My son! my son!" she cried, kissing him passionately. He blushed like a stormy sunset, and tried to disengage himself.

"Do not crumple him, mother," said Clorinda pettishly. "Your zeal is overdone."

"But he is my long-lost Absalom! Think of the rapture of having him restored to me thus. Oh, what a happy family we shall be! Bless you, Clorinda. Bless you, my children. When is the wedding to be?"

The Man in the Ironed Mask had regained his composure.

"Mother," he said sternly, "I am glad to see you looking so well. I always knew you would fall on your feet if I dropped you. I have no right to ask it—but as you seem to expect me to marry your daughter, a little information as to the circumstances under which you have supplied me with a sister would be not unwelcome."

"Stupid boy! Don't you understand that Miss Bell was good enough to engage me as mother and travelling companion when you left me to starve? Or rather, the impresario who brought her over from America engaged me, and Clorinda has been, oh, so good to me! My little drapery business failed soon after you went off, leaving me to get a stranger in the shop. I had no resource but—to go on the stage."

A FAMILY RE-UNION.

The old woman was babbling on, but the cold steel of Clorinda's gaze silenced her.

The outraged actress turned haughtily to the Man in the Ironed Mask.

"So *this* is your mother?" she said, with infinite scorn.

"So this is *not* your mother?" he said, with infinite indignation.

"Were you ever really simple enough to suspect me of having a mother?" she retorted contemptuously. "I had her on the hire system. Don't you know that a combination of maid and mother is the newest thing in actresses' wardrobes? It is safer than having a maid, and more comfortable than having a mother."

"But I *have* been a mother to you, Clorinda," the old dame pleaded.

"Oh yes, you have always been a good, obedient woman. I am not finding fault with you, and I have no wish to part with you. I do find fault, and I shall certainly part with your son."

"Nonsense," said the Man in the Ironed Mask. "The situation is essentially unchanged. She is still the mother of one of us; she can still become the mother-in-law of the other. Besides, Clorinda, that is the only way of keeping the secret in the family."

"You threaten?"

"Certainly. You are a humbug. So am I. United we stand; separated, you fall."

"You fall too."

"Not from such a height. I am still on the first rungs."

"Nor likely to get any higher."

"Indeed? Your experience of me should have taught you different. High as you are, I can raise you yet higher if you will only lift me up to you."

"How do you climb?" she said, his old ascendancy reasserting itself.

"By standing still. Profound meditation on the philosophy of modern Society has convinced me that the only way left for acquiring notoriety is to do nothing. Every other way has been exploited, and is suspected. It is only a year since the discovery flashed upon me; it is only a year that I have been putting it into practice. And yet, mark the result! Already I am a known man. I had the *entrée* to no society; for half-a-guinea a night (frequently paid in paper money) I have mingled with the most exclusive. When there was no *première* anywhere, I went to see you—not from any admiration of you, but because the *Lymarket* is the haunt of the best society, and, in addition, the virtue of Shakespeare and of yourself attracts there a highly respectable class of bishops whom I have not the opportunity of meeting elsewhere. By doing nothing I fascinated you—somebody was sure to be fascinated by it at last, as the dove flutters into the jaws of the lethargic serpent—by continuing to do nothing I completed my conquest. Had I met your advances, you would have repelled mine. My theories have been completely demonstrated, and but for the accident of our having a common mother——"

"Speak for yourself," said Clorinda haughtily.

"It is for myself that I am speaking. When we are one, I shall continue this policy of masterly inactivity of which I claim the invention, though it has long been known in the germ. Everybody knows, for instance, that not to trouble to answer letters is the surest way of acquiring the reputation of a busy man; that not to accept invitations is an infallible way of getting more; that not to care a jot about the feelings of the rest of the household is an unfailing means of enforcing universal deference. But the glory still remains to him who first grasped this great law in its generalised form, however familiar one or two isolated cases of it may be to the world. 'Do nothing' is the last word of social science, as 'Nil admirari' was its first. Just as silence is less self-contradictory than speech, so is inaction a safer foundation of fame than action. Inaction is perfect. The moment you do anything you are in the region of incompleteness, of definiteness. Your work may be outdone — or undone. Your inventions may be improved upon, your victories annulled, your popular books ridiculed, your theories superseded, your paintings decried, the seamy side of your explorations shown up. Successful doing creates not only enemies, but the material for their malice to work upon. Only by not having done anything to deserve success can you be sure of surviving the reaction which success always brings. To be is higher than to do. To be is calm, large, elemental; to do is trivial, artificial, fussy. To be has been the motto of the English aristocracy; it is the secret of their persistence. *Qui s'excuse s'accuse.* He who strives to justify his existence imperils it. To be is inexpugnable; to do is dangerous. The same principle rules in all departments of social life. What is a successful reception? A gathering at which everybody *is*. Nobody does anything. Nobody enjoys anything. There everybody *is*—if only for five minutes each, and whatever the crush and discomfort. You are there—and there you *are*, don't you know? What is social ambition? A desire to *be* in better people's drawing-rooms. What is it for which people barter health, happiness, even honour? To *be* on certain pieces of flooring inaccessible to the mass. What is the glory of doing compared with the glory of being? Let others elect to do; I elect to be."

"So long as you do not choose to be my husband——"

"It is husband or brother," he said threateningly.

"Of course. I become your sister by rejecting you, do I not?"

"Don't trifle. You understand what I mean. I will let the world know that your mother is mine."

They stood looking at each other in silent defiance. At last Clorinda spoke:

"A compromise! Let the world know that my mother is yours."

"I see. Pose as your brother?"

"Yes. That will help you up a good many rungs. I shall not deny I am your sister. My mother will certainly not deny that you are her son."

"Done! So long as my theories are not disproved: Conjugate the verb 'to be,' and you shall be successful. Let me see. How does it run? I am—your brother; thou art—my sister; she is—my mother; we are—her children; you are—my womankind; they are—all spoofed."

So the Man in the Ironed Mask turned out to be the brother of the great and good actress, Clorinda Bell. And several people had known it all along, for what but fraternal interest had taken him so often to the *Lymarket?* And when his identity leaked out, Society ran after him, and he gave the interviewers interesting details of his sister's early years. And every one spoke of his attachment to his mother, and of his solicitous attendance upon her. And in due course the tale of his virtues reached a romantic young heiress, who wooed and won him. And so he continued *being* till he was—no more. By his own request they buried him in an Ironed Mask, and put upon his tomb the profound inscription:

Here lies
THE MAN WHO WAS.

. . . .

And this was why Clorinda, disgusted with men and lovers, and unable to marry her brother, caught at the notion of the Old Maids' Club, and called upon Lillie.

It was almost as good a cover as a mother, and it was well to have something ready in case she lost her, as you cannot obtain a second mother even on the hire system. But Lord Silverdale's report consisted of one word, "Dangerous!"—and he rejoiced at the whim which enabled him thus to protect the impulsive little girl he loved.

Clorinda divined from Lillie's embarrassment next day that she was to be blackballed.

"I am afraid," she hastened to say, "that on second thoughts I must withdraw my candidature, as I could not make a practice of coming here without my mother."

Lillie referred to the rules. "Married women are admitted," she said simply. "I presume, therefore, your mother——?"

"It's just like your presumption," interrupted Clorinda, and, flouncing angrily out of the Club, she invited a journalist to tea.

Next day the *Moon* said she was going to join the Old Maids' Club.

CHAPTER IV

THE CLUB GETS ADVERTISED

"I SEE you have disregarded my ruling, Miss Dulcimer?" said Lord Silverdale, pointing to the paragraph in the *Moon*. "What is the use of my trying the candidates if you're going to admit the plucked?"

"I am surprised at you, Lord Silverdale. I thought you had more wisdom than to base a reproach on a *Moon* paragraph. You might have known it was not true."

"That is not my experience, Miss Dulcimer. I do not think a statement is necessarily false because it appears in the newspapers. There is hardly a paper in which I have not, at some time or other, come across a true piece of news. Even the *Moon* is not all made of green cheese."

"But you surely do not think I would accept Clorinda Bell after your warning? Not but that I am astonished. She assured me she was ice."

"Precisely. And so I marked her 'Dangerous.' Are there any more candidates to-day?"

"Heaps and heaps! From all parts of the kingdom letters have come from ladies anxious to become Old Maids. There is even one application from Paris. Ought I to entertain that?"

"Certainly. Candidates may hail from anywhere—excepting, naturally, the United States."

"But what, I wonder, has caused this tide of applications?"

"The *Moon*, of course. The fiction that Clorinda Bell intended to take the secular veil has attracted all these imitators. She has given the Club a good advertisement in endeavouring merely to give herself one."

"You suspect her, then, of being herself responsible for the statement that she was going to join the Club?"

"No. I am sure of it. Who but herself knew that she was not?"

"I can hardly imagine that she would employ such base arts," said Lillie.

"Higher arts are out of employment now-a-days."

"Is there any way of finding out?"

"I am afraid not. She has no bosom friends. Stay—there is her mother!"

"Mothers do not tell their daughters' secrets. They do not know them."

"Well, there's her brother. I was introduced to him the other day at Mrs. Leo Hunter's. But he seems such a reticent chap. Only opens his mouth twice an hour, and then merely to show his teeth. Oh, I know! I'll get at the *Moon* man. My aunt, the philanthropist, who is quite a journalist (sends so many paragraphs round about herself, you know), will tell me who invents that sort of news, and I'll interview the beggar."

"Yes; won't it be fun to run her to earth?" said Lillie gleefully.

Silverdale took advantage of her good-humour.

"I hope the discovery of the baseness of your sex will turn you again to mine." There was a pleading tenderness in his eyes.

"What! to your baseness? I thought you were so good."

"I am no good without you," he said boldly.

"Oh, that is too rich! Suppose I had never been born?"

"I should have wished I hadn't."

"But you wouldn't have known *I* hadn't."

"You're getting too metaphysical for my limited understanding."

"Nonsense, you understand metaphysics as well as I do," protested Lillie gravely.

"Do not disparage yourself. You know I cannot endure metaphysics."

"Why not?"

"Because they are mostly made in Germany. And all Germans write as if their aim was to be misunderstood. Listen to my simple English lay."

"Another love-song to Chloe?"

"No; a really great poem, suggested by the number of papers and forms I have already seen this *Moon* paragraph in."

He took down the banjo, thrummed it, and sang

THE GRAND PARAGRAPHIC TOUR

I composed a little story
  About a cockatoo,
With no desire of glory,
  To see what would ensue.

It took the public liking
  From China to Peru;
The point of it was striking,
  Though perfectly untrue.

It began in a morning journal,
  When gooseberries were due,
The subject seemed eternal,
  So many scribes it drew.

And in every evening column
  It made a great to-do,
Sub-editors so solemn
  Just adding thereunto.

In the "London Correspondence"
  'Twas written up anew,
And then a fog came on dense
  And hid me quite from view.

And some said they had heard it
  From keepers in the Zoo;
While others, who averred it,
  Had *seen* that cockatoo.

It lived, my little fable,
  I chuckled and I crew,
As, at my very table,
  Friends twisted it askew.

It leapt across the Channel—
A bounding kangaroo;
It did not shrink like flannel,
But gained in size and hue.

It appeared in French and Spanish,
With errors not a few;
In Russian, Greek, and Danish,
Inaccurately, too.

And waxing more romantic
With every wind that blew,
It crossed the broad Atlantic,
And grew and grew and grew.

At last like boomerang it
Sped back across the blue,
And tall and touched with twang it
Appeared whence first it flew.

An annual affliction,
It tours the wide world through,
And I, who bred the fiction,
Have come to think it true.

Life's burden it has doubled,
My peace of mind it slew,
My dreams by it are troubled,
My days are filled with rue.

Its horrors yearly thicken,
It sticks to me like glue;
And, sad and conscience-stricken,
I curse that cockatoo.

"That's what will happen with Clorinda Bell's membership of our Club," continued the poet. "She will remain a member long after it has ceased to exist. Once a thing has appeared in print, you cannot destroy it. A published lie is immortal. Age cannot wither it, nor custom stale its infinite variety. It thrives by contradiction. Give me a cup of tea, and I will go and interview the *Moon* man at once."

The millionaire, hearing tea was on the tray, came in to join them, and Silverdale soon went off to his aunt, Lady Goody-Goody Twoshoes, and got the address of the man on the *Moon*.

"Lillie, what's this I see in the *Moon* about Clorinda Bell joining your Club?" asked the millionaire.

"An invention, father."

The millionaire looked disappointed.

"Will all your Old Maids be young?"

"Yes, papa. It is best to catch them young."

"I shall be dining at the Club sometimes," he announced irrelevantly.

"Oh no, papa. You are not admissible during the sittings."

"Why, you let Lord Silverdale in!"

THE MILLIONAIRE.

"Yes; but he is not married."

"Oh!" And the millionaire went away with a brighter brow.

The rest of the afternoon Lillie was busy conducting the preliminary examination of a surprisingly beautiful girl who answered to the name of "Princess," and would give no other name for the present, not even to Turple the Magnificent.

"You got my letter, I suppose?" asked the Princess.

"Oh yes," said the President; "I should have written to you."

"I thought it best to come to see you about it at once, as I have suddenly determined to go to Brighton, and I don't know when I may be back. I had not heard of your Club till the other day, when I saw in the *Moon* that Clorinda Bell was going to join it, and anything she joins must of course be strictly proper, so I haven't troubled to ask the Honourable Miss Primpole's advice—she lives with me, you know. An only orphan cannot be too careful."

"You need not fear," said Lillie; "Miss Bell is not to be a member. We have refused her."

"Oh, indeed! Well, perhaps it is as well not to bring the scent of the footlights over the Club. It is hard upon Miss Bell: but if you were to admit her, I suppose other actresses would want to come in. There are so many of them that prefer to remain single."

"Are you sure *you* do?"

"Positive. My experience of lovers has been so harassing and peculiar, that I shall never marry; and as my best friends cannot call me a wall-flower, I venture to think you will find me a valuable ally in your noble campaign against the degrading superstition that old maids are women who have not found husbands, just as widows are women who have lost them."

"I sincerely hope so," said Lillie enthusiastically. "You express my views very neatly. May I ask what are the peculiar experiences you speak of?"

"Certainly. Some months ago I amused myself by recording the strange episodes of my first loves, and in anticipation of your request I have brought the manuscript."

"Oh, please read it!" said Lillie excitedly.

"Of course I have not given all the real names."

"No; I quite understand. Won't you have a chocolate cream before you commence?"

"Thank you. They look lovely. How awfully sweet!"

"Too sweet for you?" inquired Lillie anxiously.

"No, no. I mean they are just nice."

The Princess untied the pretty pink ribbon that enfolded the dainty scented manuscript, and, pausing only to munch an occasional chocolate cream, she read on till the shades of evening fell over the Old Maids' Club, and the soft glow of the candles illumined its dainty complexion.

CHAPTER V

THE PRINCESS OF PORTMAN SQUARE

"I AM an only child.

"I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, and although there was no royal crest on it, yet no princess could be more comfortable in the purple than I was in the ordinary trappings of babyhood. From the cradle upwards I was surrounded with love and luxury. My pet name 'Princess' fitted me like a glove. I was the autocrat of the nursery, and my power scarce diminished when I rose to the drawing-room. My parents were very obedient, and did not even conceal from me that I was beautiful. In short, they did their best to spoil me, though I cannot admit that they succeeded. I lost them both before I was sixteen. My poor mother died first, and my poor father followed within a week—whether from grief, or from a cold caught through standing bare-headed in the churchyard, or from employing the same doctor, I cannot precisely determine.

"After the usual period of sorrow, I began to pick up a bit and to go out under the care of my duenna, a faded flower of the aristocracy, whose declining years my guardian had soothed by quartering her on me. She is a gentle old spinster, the seventh daughter of a penniless peer; and although she had seen hard times, and had almost been reduced to marriage, yet she had scant respect for my ten thousand a year. She has never lost the sense of condescension in living with me, and would be horrified to hear she is in receipt of a salary. It is to this sense of superiority on her part that I owe a good deal of the liberty I enjoy under her *régime*. She does not expect in me that rigid obedience to venerable forms and conventions which she prescribes for herself; she regards it as a privilege of the higher gentlewoman to be bound hand and foot by fashionable etiquette, and so long as my liberty does not degenerate into licence I am welcome to as much as I please of it. She has continued to call me 'Princess,' finding doubtless some faint reverberation of pleasure in the magnificent syllables. I should add that her name is the Honourable Miss Primpole, and that she is not afraid of the butler.

"Our town house was situated in Portman Square, and my parents tenanted it during the season. There is nothing very poetic about the Square, perhaps, not even in the summer when the garden is in bloom, yet it was here that I first learnt to love. This dull parallelogram was the birth-place of a passion as spiritual and intangible as ever thrilled maiden's heart. I fell in love with a Voice.

"It was a rich baritone Voice, with a compass of two and a half octaves, rising from full bass organ-notes to sweet flute-like tenor tones. It was a glorious Voice, now resonant with martial ecstasy, now faint with mystic rapture.

Its vibrations were charged with inexpressible emotion, and it sang of love and death and high heroic themes.

"I heard it first a few months after my father's funeral. It was night. I had been indoors all day, torpid and miserable, but roused myself at last and took a few turns in the Square. The air was warm and scented, a cloudless moon flooded the roadway with mellow light, and sketched in the silhouettes of the trees in the background. I had reached the opposite side of the Square for the second time when the Voice broke out. My heart stood still, and I with it.

"On the soft summer air the Voice rose and fell; it was accompanied on the piano, but it seemed in subtler harmony with the moonlight and the perfumed repose of the night. It came through an open window, behind which the singer sat in the gloaming. With the first tremors of that Voice my soul forgot its weariness in a strange sweet trance that trembled on pain. The song seemed to draw out all the hidden longing of my maiden soul, as secret writing is made legible by fire. When the Voice ceased a great blackness fell upon all things, the air grew bleak. I waited and waited, but the Square remained silent. The footsteps of stray pedestrians, the occasional roll of a carriage, alone fell on my anxious ear. I returned to my house, shivering as with cold.

"I had never loved before. I had read and reflected a great deal about love, and knew nothing about it. I did not know that I loved now—for that discovery only came later, when I found myself wandering nightly to the other side of the parallelogram, listening for the Voice. Rarely, very rarely, was my pilgrimage rewarded, but twice or thrice a week the Square became an enchanted garden, full of roses, whose petals were music. Round that baritone

Voice I had built up an ideal man—tall and straight-limbed and stalwart, fair-haired and blue-eyed and noble-featured, like the hero of a Northern saga. His soul was vast as the sea, shaken with the storms of passion, dimpled with smiles of tenderness. His spirit was at once mighty and delicate, throbbing with elemental forces, yet keen and swift to comprehend all subtleties of thought and feeling. I could not understand myself, yet I felt that he would understand me. He had the heart of a lion and of a little child; he was as merciful as he was strong, as pure as he was wise. To be with him were happiness, to feel his kiss ecstasy, to be gathered to his breast delirium. But, alas! he never knew that I was waiting under his window.

"I made several abortive attempts to discover who he was, or to see him. According to the Directory, the house was occupied by Lady Westerton. I concluded that he was her eldest son. That he might be her husband—or some other lady's—never even occurred to me. I do not know why I should have attached the Voice to a bachelor, any more than I can explain why he should be the eldest son, rather than the youngest. But romance has a logic of its own. From the topmost window of my house I could see Lady Westerton's house across the trees, but I never saw him leave or enter it. Once, a week went by without my hearing him sing. I did not know whether to think of him as a sick bird, or as one flown to warmer climes. I tried to construct his life from his periods of song, and watched the lights in his window; my whole life circled round him. It was only when I grew pale and feverish, and was forced by the doctors and my guardian to go yachting, that my fancies gradually detached themselves from my blue-eyed hero. The sea-salt freshened my thoughts, and I became a healthy-minded girl again, carolling joyously in my cabin, and taking pleasure in listening to my own voice. I threw my novels overboard (metaphorically, that is), and set the Hon. Miss Primpole chatting instead, when the seascape palled upon me. She had a great fund of strictly respectable memories. Most people's recollections are of no use to anybody but the owner, but hers afforded entertainment for both of us. By the time I was back in London the Voice was no longer part even of my dreams, though it seemed to belong to them. But for accident, it might have remained for ever 'a Voice and nothing more.'

"The accident happened at a musical afternoon in Kensington. I was introduced to a tall, fair, handsome blue-eyed guardsman, Captain Athelstan by name. His conversation was charming, and I took a lot of it, while Miss Primpole was busy flirting with a seductive Spaniard. You could not tell Miss Primpole was flirting, except by looking at the man. In the course of the afternoon the hostess asked the Captain to sing. As he went to the piano my heart began to flutter with a strange foreboding. He had no music with him, but plunged at once into the premonitory chords. My agitation increased tenfold. He was playing the prelude to one of the Voice's songs—a strange, haunting song, with a Schubert atmosphere—a song which I had looked for in vain among the classics. At once he was transfigured to my eyes; all my sleeping romantic fancies woke to delicious life; and in the instant in which I waited, with bated breath, for the outbreak of the Voice at the well-known turn of the melody, it was borne in upon me that this was the only man I had ever loved, or would ever love—my saga-hero! my Berserker! my Norse giant!

"When the voice started it was not *my* Voice. It was a thin, throaty tenor. Compared with the Voice of Portman Square, it was as a tinkling rivulet to a rushing full-

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MISS PRIMPOLE WAS FLIRTING WITH A SEDUCTIVE SPANIARD.

volumed river. I sank back on the lounge, hiding my emotions behind my fan.

"When the song was finished, he made his way through the 'bravas' to my side.

"'Sweetly pretty!' I murmured.

"'What is?' he asked, with a smile. 'The song or the singing?'

"'The song,' I answered frankly. 'Is it yours?'

"'No, but the singing is.' His good-humour was so delightful that I forgave his not having my Voice.

"'What is its name?'

"'It is anonymous—like the composer.'

"'Who is he?'

"'I must not tell.'

"'Can you give me a copy of the song?'

"He became embarrassed.

"'I would with pleasure, if it were mine. But the fact is—I—I—had no right to sing it at all, and the composer would be awfully vexed if he knew.'

"'Original composer?'

"'He is, indeed. He cannot bear to think of his songs being sung in public.'

"'Dear me! What a terrible mystery you are making!' I laughed.

"'R—eally there is no abracadabra about it. You misunderstand me. But I deserve it all for breaking faith, and exploiting his lovely song so as to drown my beastly singing.'

"'You need not reproach yourself,' I said. 'I have heard it before.'

"He started perceptibly.

"'Impossible!' he gasped.

"'Thank you,' I said freezingly.

"'But how?'

"'A little bird sang it me.'

"'It is you who are making the mystery now.'

"'Tit for tat. But I will discover yours.'

"'Not unless you are a witch.'

"'A what?'

"'A witch.'

"'I am,' I said emphatically. 'So you see it's of no use hiding anything from me. Come, tell me all, or I will belabour you with my broomstick.'

"'If you know, why should I tell you?'

"'I want to see if you can tell the truth.'

"'No, I can't.' We both laughed. 'See what a cruel dilemma you place me in!' he said beseechingly.

"'Tell me, at least, why he won't publish his songs. Is he too modest, too timid?'

"'Neither. He loves art for art's sake—that is all.'

"'I don't understand.'

"'He writes to please himself. To create music is his highest pleasure. He can't see what it has got to do with anybody else.'

"'But surely he wants the world to enjoy his work?'

"'Why? That would be art for the world's sake, art for fame's sake, not to mention art for money's sake!'

"'What an extraordinary view!'

"'Why so? The true artist—the man to whom creation is rapture—surely he is his own world? Unless he is in need of money, why should he concern himself with the outside universe? My friend cannot understand why Schopenhauer should have troubled himself to chisel epigrams or Leopardi lyrics, to tell people that life was not worth living. Had either been a true artist, he would have gone on living his own worthless life, unruffled by the applause of the mob. My friend can understand a poet translating into inspired song the sacred secrets of his soul, but he cannot understand his scattering them broadcast through the country, still less taking a royalty on them. He says it is selling your soul in the market-place, and almost as degrading as going on the stage.'

"'And do you agree with him?'

"'Not entirely, otherwise I should never have yielded to the temptation to sing his song to-night. Fortunately he will never hear of it. He never goes into society, and I am his only friend.'

"'Dear me!' I said sarcastically. 'Is he as careful to conceal his body as his soul?'

"His face grew grave. 'He has an affliction,' he said, in low tones.

"'Oh, forgive me!' I said remorsefully. Tears came into my eyes as the vision of the Norse giant gave way to that of an English hunchback. My adoring worship was transformed to an adoring matronly tenderness. Divinely-gifted sufferer, if I cannot lean on thy strength, thou shalt lean on mine!

"So ran my thought, till the mist cleared from my eyes, and I saw again the glorious saga-hero at my side, and grew strangely confused and distraught.

"'There is nothing to forgive,' answered Captain Athelstan; 'you did not know him.'

"'You forget that I am a witch. But I do not know him—it is true. I do not even know his name. Yet within a week I undertake to become a friend of his.'

"He shook his head. 'You do not know him.'

"'I admitted that,' I answered. 'Give me a week, and he shall not only know me, he shall abjure those sublime principles of his at my request.'

"The spirit of mischief moved me to throw down the challenge—or, was it some deeper impulse?

"He smiled sceptically.

"'Of course, if you know somebody who will introduce you——' he began.

"'Nobody shall introduce me,' I interrupted.

"'Well, he'll never speak to you first.'

"'You mean it would be unmaidenly for me to speak to him first. Well, I will bind myself to do nothing of which Mrs. Grundy would disapprove. And yet the result shall be as I say.'

"'Then I shall admit you are indeed a witch.'

"'You don't believe in my power—that is. Well, what will you wager?'

"'If you achieve your impossibility you will deserve anything.'

"'Will you back your incredulity with a pair of gloves?'

"'With a hundred.'

"'Thank you, I am not a Briareus. Let us say one pair, then.'

"'So be it.'

"'But no countermining. Promise me not to communicate with your mysterious friend in the interval.'

"'I promise. But how shall I know the result?'

"I pondered. 'I will write—no, that would be hardly proper. Meet me in the Royal Academy, room six, at the portrait of a gentleman, about noon to-morrow week.'

"'A week is a long time!' he sighed.

"I arched my eyebrows. 'A week a long time for such a task!' I exclaimed.

"Next day I called at the house of the Voice. A gorgeous creature in plush opened the door.

"'I want to see—to see——Gracious! I've forgotten his name!' I said, in patent chagrin. I clucked my tongue, puckered my lips, tapped the step with my parasol, then smiled pitifully at the creature in plush. He turned out to be only human, for a responsive sympathetic smile flickered across his pompous face. 'You know—the singer!' I said, as if with a sudden inspiration.

"'Oh, Lord Arthur?' he said.

"'Yes, of course!' I cried, with a little trill of laughter. 'How stupid of me! Please tell him I want to see him on an important matter.'

"'He—he's busy, I'm afraid, miss.'

"'Oh, but he'll see me,' I said confidently.

"'Yes, miss; who shall I say, miss?'

"'The Princess.'

"He made a startled obeisance, and ushered me into a little room on the right of the hall. In a few moments he returned, and said, 'His lordship will be down in a second, your Highness.'

"Sixty minutes seemed to go to that second, so racked was I with curiosity. At last I heard a step outside and a hand on the door, and at that moment a horrible thought flashed into my mind. What certainty was there my singer was a hunchback? Suppose his affliction were something more loathly? What if he had a monstrous wen? For the instant after his entry I was afraid to look up. When I did, I saw a short, dark-haired young man, with proper limbs and refined features. But his face wore a blank expression, and I wondered why I had not divined before that my musician was blind.

"He bowed and advanced towards me. He came straight in my direction, so that I saw he *could* see. The blank expression gave place to one of inquiry.

"'I have ventured to call upon your lordship in reference to a charity concert,' I said sweetly. 'I am one of your neighbours, living just across the Square, and as the good work is to be done in the district, I dared to hope that I could persuade you to take part in it.'

"I happened to catch sight of my face in the glass of a chiffonier as I spoke, and it was as pure and candid and beautiful as the face of one of Guido's angels. When I ceased I looked up at Lord Arthur's; it was spasmodically agitated, the mouth was working wildly. A nervous dread seized me.

"After what seemed an endless interval, he uttered an explosive 'Put!' following it up by, 'm—m—m—m—e d—d—own f—f—f—f—f—f—f—or two g—g—g—g—g—g—g—g——'

"'It is very kind of you,' I interrupted mercifully. 'But I did not propose to ask you for a subscription. I wanted to enlist your services as a performer. But I fear I have made a mistake. I understood you sang.' Inwardly I was furious with the stupid creature in plush for having misled me into such an unpleasant situation.

"'I d—d—do s—s—s—s—s——' he answered.

"As he stood there hissing, the truth flashed upon me at last. I had heard that the most dreadful stammerers enunciate as easily as anybody else when they sing, because the measured swing of the time keeps them steady. My heart sank as I thought of the Voice so mutilated! Poor young peer! Was this to be the end of all my beautiful visions?

"As cheerfully as I could I cut short his sibilations.

" Oh, that's all right, then,' I said. 'Then I may put you down for a couple of items?'

"He shook his head and held up his hands deprecatingly.

"'Anything but that!' he stammered. 'Make me a patron, a committee-man, anything! I do not sing in public.'

"While he was saying this I thought long and deeply. The affliction was after all less terrible than I had a right to expect, and I knew from the advertisement columns that it was easily curable. Demosthenes, I remembered, had stoned it to death. I felt my love reviving, as I looked into his troubled face, instinct with the double aristocracy of rank and genius. At the worst the singing voice was unaffected by the disability—and as for the conversational, well, there was consolation in the prospect of having the last word, while one's husband was still having the first. *En attendant*, I could have wished him to sing his replies instead of speaking them, for not only should I thus enjoy his glorious voice, but the interchange of ideas would proceed less tardily. However, that would have made him into an operatic personage, and I did not want him to look so ridiculous as all that.

"It would be tedious to recount our interview at the length it extended to. Suffice it to say that I gained my point. Without letting out that I knew of his theories of art for art's sake, I yet artfully pleaded that, whatever one's views, charity alters cases, inverts everything, justifies anything.

"'For instance,' I said, with charming *naïveté*, 'I should not have dared to call on you but in its sacred name.'

"He agreed to sing two songs—nay, two of his own songs. I was to write to him particulars of time and place. He saw me to the door. I held out my hand, and he took it, and we looked at each other, smiling brightly.

"'B—but— I d—d—d—on't know your n—n—n—ame,' he said suddenly. 'P—p—p—rincess what?'

"He spoke more fluently, now he had regained his composure.

"'Princess,' I answered, my eyes gleaming merrily. 'That is all. The Honourable Miss Primpole will give me a character, if you require one.'

"He laughed—his laugh was like the Voice—and followed me with his eyes as I glided away.

"I had won my gloves—and in a day. I thought remorsefully of the poor saga-hero destined to wait a week in suspense as to the result. But it was too late to remedy this, and the organisation of the charity concert needed all my thoughts. I was in for it now, and I resolved to carry it through. But it was not so easy as I had lightly assumed. Getting the artistes, of course, was nothing—there are always so many professionals out of work or anxious to be brought out, and so many amateurs in search of amusement. I could have filled the Albert Hall with entertainers.

"Nor did I anticipate any difficulty in disposing of the tickets. If you are at all popular in society, you can get a good deal of unpopularity by forcing them on your friends. No, the real difficulty about this charity concert was the discovery of an object in aid of which to give it. In my innocence I had imagined that the world was simply bristling with unexploited opportunities for well-doing. Alas, I soon found that philanthropy was an overcrowded profession. There was not a single nook or corner of the universe but had been ransacked by these restless free lances—not a gap, not a cranny, but had been filled up. In vain I explored the map, in the hopes of lighting on some undiscovered hunting-ground in Far Cathay or where the khamsin sweeps the Afric deserts. I found that the wants of the most benighted savages were carefully attended to, and that, even when they had none, they were thoughtfully supplied with them. Anxiously I scanned the newspapers in search of a calamity the sufferers by which I might relieve, but only one happened during that week, and that was snatched from between my very fingers by a lady who had just been through the Divorce Court. In my despair I bethought myself of the preacher I sat under. He was a very handsome man, and published his sermons by request.

"I went to him, and I said, 'How is the church?'

"'It is all right, thank you,' he said.

"'Doesn't it want anything done to it?'

"'No, it is in perfect repair. My congregation is so very good!'

"I groaned aloud. 'But isn't there any improvement that you would like?'

"'The last of the gargoyles was put up last week. Mediæval architecture is always so picturesque. I have had the entire structure made mediæval, you know.'

"'But isn't the outside in need of renovation?'

"'What! When I have just had it made mediæval!'

"'But the interior—there must be something defective somewhere?'

"'Not to my knowledge.'

"'But think! think!' I cried desperately. 'The aisles, transept, nave, lectern, pews, chancel, pulpit, apse, porch, altar-cloths, organ, spire, — is there nothing in need of anything?'

"He shook his head.

"'Wouldn't you like a coloured window to somebody?'

"'All the windows are taken up. My congregation is so very good.'

"'A memorial brass, then?'

"He mused. 'There is only one of my flock who has done anything memorable lately.'

"My heart gave a great leap of joy. 'Then why do you neglect him?' I asked indignantly. 'If we do not perpetuate the memory of virtue——'

"'He's alive,' he interrupted.

"I bit my lip in vexation.

"'I think you need a few more choristers,' I murmured.

"'Oh no, we are sending some away.'

"'The Sunday-school Fund—how is that?'

"'I am looking about for a good investment for the surplus. Do you know of any? A good mortgage, perhaps?'

"'Is there none on the church?' I cried, with a flicker of hope.

"'Heaven forbid!'

"I cudgelled my brains frantically.

"'What do you think of a lightning-rod?'

"'A premier necessity. I never preach in a building unprotected by one.'

"I made one last wild search.

"'How about a reredos?'

"He looked at me in awful, pained silence. I saw I had stumbled. 'I—I—mean—a new wing,' I stammered.

"'I am afraid you are not well this morning,' said the preacher, patting my hand soothingly. 'Won't you come and talk it over—whatever it is—another time?'

"'No, no,' I cried excitedly. 'It must be settled at once. I have it. A new peal of bells!'

"'What is the matter with the bells?' he asked anxiously. 'There isn't a single one cracked.'

"I saw his dubiety, and profited by it. I learnt afterwards it was due to his having no ear of his own.

"'Cracked! Perhaps not,' I replied, in contemptuous accents. 'But they deserve to be. No wonder the newspapers keep correspondence going on the subject!'

"'Yes; but what correspondents object to is the bells ringing at all.'

"'I don't wonder,' I said. 'I don't say your bells are worse than the majority, or that I haven't got a specially sensitive ear for music, but I know that when I hear their harsh clanging, I—I—well, I don't feel inclined to go to church, and that's the truth. I am quite sure if you had a really musical set of chimes, it would increase the spirituality of the neighbourhood.'

"'How so?' he asked sceptically.

"'It would keep down swearing on Sundays.'

"'Oh!' He pondered a moment; then said, 'But that would be a great expense.'

"'Indeed? I thought bells were cheap.'

"'Certainly — area bells, hand bells, sleigh bells. But church bells are very costly. There are only a few foundries in the kingdom. But why are you so concerned about my church?'

"'Because I am giving a charity concert, and I should like to devote the proceeds to something.'

"'A very exemplary desire. But I fear one bell is the most you could get out of a charity concert.'

"I looked disappointed. 'What a pity! It would have been such a nice precedent—to improve the tone of the church. The "constant readers" would have had to cease their letters.'

"'No, no, impossible. A "constant reader" seems to be so called because he is a constant writer.'

"'But there might have been leaders about it.'

"'Hardly sensational enough for that. Stay, I have an idea. In the beautiful ages of faith, when a church bell was being cast, the pious used to bring silver vessels to be fused with the bell-metal in the furnace, so as to give the bell a finer tone. A mediæval practice is always so poetical. Perhaps I could revive it. My congregation is so very good.'

"'Good!' I echoed, clapping my hands.

"'But a concert will not suffice—we shall need a bazaar,' said the preacher.

"'Oh, but I must have a concert!'

"'Certainly. Bazaars include concerts.'

"That was how the Great Church Bazaar originated, and how the Rev. Melitos Smith came to resurrect the beautiful mediæval custom that brought him so much kudos, and extracted such touching sentiments from hardened journalists. The bazaar lasted a week, and raised a number of ladies in the social scale, and married off three of my girl friends, and cut me off the visiting list of the Duchess of Dash. She was pining for a chance of coming out in a comic opera chanson, but, this being a church bazaar, I couldn't allow her to kick up her heels.

HOW THE DUCHESS WANTED TO APPEAR.

"Everything could be bought at that bazaar, from photographs of the Rev. Melitos Smith to impracticable mousetraps, from bread and cheese to kisses. There were endless side-shows, and six gipsy girls scattered about the rooms, so that you could have your fortune told in six different ways. I should not like to say how much that bazaar cost me when the bill for the bells came in; but then Lord Arthur sang daily in the concert hall, and I could also deduct the price of the pair of gloves Captain Athelstan gave me. For the Captain honourably stood the loss of his wager,—nay more, cheerfully accepted his defeat, and there on the spot—before the portrait of another gentleman—offered to enlist in the bazaar. And very useful he proved, too. We had to be together, organising it, nearly all day, and I don't know what I should have done without him. I don't know what his regiment did without him, but then I have never been able to find out when our gallant officers do their work. They seem always to be saving it up for a rainy day.

"I was never more surprised in my life than when, on the last night of the bazaar-boom, amid the buzz of a brisk wind-up, Lord Arthur and Captain Athelstan came into the little presidential sanctum which had been run up for me, and requested a special interview.

"'I can give you five minutes,' I said, for I felt my finger was on the pulse of the bazaar, and my time correspondingly important.

"They looked grateful, then embarrassed. Captain Athelstan opened his mouth—and closed it.

"'*You* had better tell her!' he said nervously to Lord Arthur.

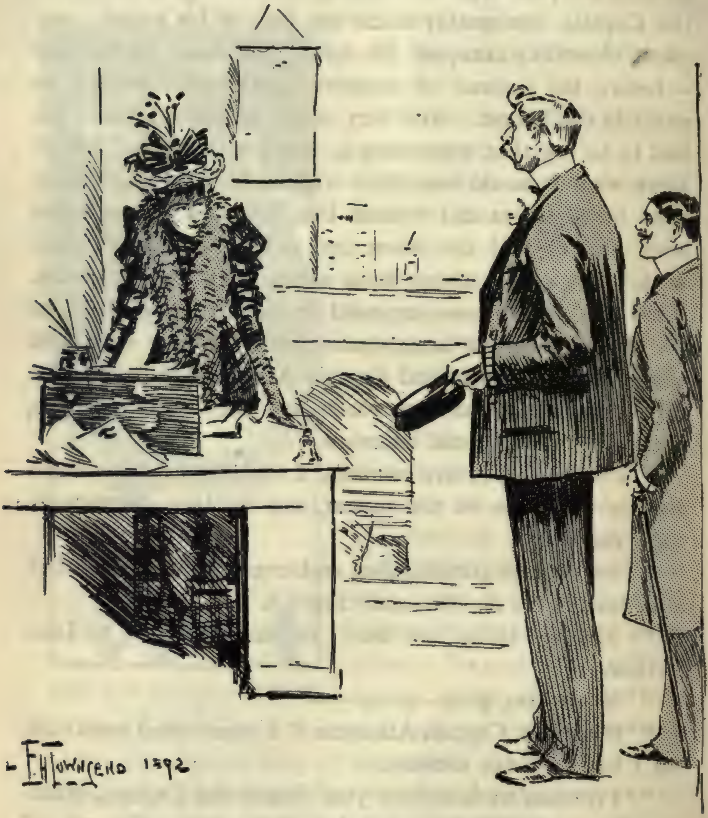
"'N—n—no, y—y—y—y——'

"'What is it, Captain Athelstan?' I interrupted pointedly, for I had only five minutes.

"'Princess, we both love you,' began the Captain, blushing like a hobbledehoy, and rushing *in medias res.* I allowed them to call me Princess, because it was not my Christian name.

"'Gentlemen!' I expostulated wearily, 'is this the time, when I am busy feeling the pulse of the bazaar?'

"'You gave us five minutes,' pleaded the Captain, determined to do or die, now he was in the thick of it.



BAZAAR PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE.

"'Go on,' I said. 'I will forgive you everything—even your love of me—if you are only brief.'

"'We both love you. We are great friends. We have no secrets. We told each other. We are doubtful if you love either—or which. We have come together.'

"He fired off the short sharp sentences as from a six-barrelled revolver.

"'Captain Athelstan—Lord Arthur,' I said, 'I am deeply touched by the honour you have done your friendship and me. I will be equally frank—and brief—with you. I cannot choose either of you, because I love you both. Like every girl, I formed an ideal of a lover. I have been fortunate in finding my ideal in the flesh. I have been unfortunate in finding it in two pieces. Fate has bisected it, and given the form to one and the voice to the other. My ideal looks like you, Captain Athlestan, and sings like you, Lord Arthur. It is a stupid position, I know, and I feel like the donkey between two bundles of hay. But, under the circumstances, I have no choice.'

"They looked at each other half-rapturously, half-despairingly.

"'Then what's to be done?' cried the Captain.

"'I don't know,' I said hopelessly. 'Love seems not only blind, but a blind alley this time.'

"'D--d—d' you m—m—mean,' asked Lord Arthur:

'How happy could I be with either, were t'other dear charmer away?'

"I was glad he sang it, because it precipitated matters.

"'That is the precise position,' I admitted.

"'Oh then, Arthur, my boy, I congratulate you,' said the Captain huskily.

"'N—n—no, I'll g—g—go away,' said the singer.

"They wrangled for full ten minutes, but the position remained a block.

"'Gentlemen,' I interposed, 'if either of you had consented to accept the other's sacrifice, the problem would have been solved; only I should have taken the other. But two self-sacrifices are as bad as none.'

"'Then let us toss up, Princess,' said the Captain impulsively.

"'Oh no!' I cried, with a shudder. 'Submit my life to the chances of head or tail! It would make me feel like a murderess, with you for gentlemen of the jury.'

"A painful silence fell upon the sanctum; unwitting of the tragedy playing within, all the fun of the fair went on without.

"'Listen,' I said at last. 'I will be the wife of him who wins me. Chance shall not decide, but prowess. Like the Princesses of eld, I will set you a task. Whoever accomplishes it, shall win my hand.'

"'Agreed!' they said eagerly, though not simultaneously.

"'Ah, but what shall it be?' I murmured.

"'Why not a competition?' suggested the Captain.

"'Very well, a competition—provided you promise to fight fair, and not play into each other's hands.'

"They promised; and together we excogitated and rejected all sorts of competitions. The difficulty was to find something in which each would have a fair chance. At length we arranged that they should play a game of chess, the winner to be mated. They agreed it would be a real 'match-game.' The five minutes had by this time lasted half-an-hour, so I dismissed them and hastened to feel the pulse of the bazaar, which was getting more and more feverish as the break-up drew nigh.

"They played the game in Lord Arthur's study. Lord Arthur was 'white' and the Captain 'black.' Everything was fair and above-board. But they played rather slowly. Every evening I sent the butler over to make inquiries.

"'The Princess's compliments,' he was told to say, 'and how is it to-day?'

"'It is getting on,' they told him, and he came back with a glad face. He was a kind soul, despite his calves,—and he thought there was a child dying.

"Once a week I used to go over and look at it. Ostensibly I called in connection with the bazaar accounts. I could not see any difference in the position from one week's end to another. There seemed to be a clump of pawns in the middle, with all the other pieces looking idly on; there was no thoroughfare anywhere.

"They told me it always came like that when you played cautiously. They said it was the French opening. I could not see any opening anywhere; it certainly was not the English way of fighting. Picture my suspense during those horrible weeks!

"'Is this the way all match-games are played?' I said once.

"'N—n—o!' admittted Lord Arthur. 'We for—g—g—g—ot to p—p—p—ut a t—t—t—t—t—t—ime-limit.'

"'What's the time-limit?' I asked the Captain, wishing my singer could learn to put one to his sentences.

"'So many moves must be made in an hour—usually fifteen. Otherwise the younger champion would always win, merely by outliving the elder. We forgot to include that condition.'

"At length our butler brought back word that 'it couldn't last much longer.' His face was grave, and he gave the message in low tones.

"'What a blessing! It's been lingering long enough! I wish they would polish it off!' I murmured fretfully. After that I frequently caught him looking at me as if I were Lucrezia Borgia.

"The end came suddenly.

"The butler went across to make the usual inquiry. He returned, with a foolish face of horror, and whispered, 'It is all over. It has been drawn by perpetual check!'

"'Great heavens!' I cried. My consternation was so manifest that he forgave the utterance of a peevish moment. I put on my nicest hat at once and went over. We held a council of war afresh.

"'Let's go by who catches the biggest trout,' suggested the Captain.

"'No,' I said, 'I will not be angled for. Besides, the biggest is not grammatical. It should be the bigger.'

"Thus reproved, the Captain grew silent, and we came to a deadlock once more. I gave up the hunt at last.

"'I think the best plan will be for you both to go away and travel. Go round the world, see fresh faces, try to forget me. One of you will succeed.'

"'But suppose we both succeed?' asked the Captain.

"'That would be more awkward than ever,' I admitted.

"'And if neither succeed?' asked Lord Arthur at some length.

"'I should say neither succeeds,' I remarked severely. 'Neither takes a singular verb.'

"'Pardon me,' said Lord Arthur, with some spirit. 'The plurality is merely apparent. "Succeed" is subjunctive after "if."'

"'Ah, true!' I said. 'Then suppose you go round the world, and I give my hand to whoever comes back and proposes to me first?'

"'Something like the men in Jules Verne!' cried the Captain. 'Glorious!'

"'Except that it can be done quicker now,' I said.

"Lord Arthur fell in joyously with the idea, which was a godsend to me, for the worry of having about you two men whom you love, and who love you, cannot be easily conceived by those who have not been through it. They, too, were pining away, and felt the journey would do them good. Captain Athelstan applied for three months' furlough. He was to put a girdle round the earth from West to East; Lord Arthur, from East to West. It was thought this would work fairly—as, whatever advantages one outgoing route had over the other would be lost on the return. Each drew up his scheme and prepared his equipment. The starting-point was to be my house, and, consequently, this was also the goal. After forty-eight days had passed (the minimum time possible), I was to remain at home day and night, awaiting the telegram which was to be sent the moment either touched English soil again. On the receipt of the telegram I was to take up my position at the front window of the ground floor, with a white rose in my hair to show I was still unwon, and to wait there day and night for the arrival of my offer of marriage, which I was not to have the option of refusing. During the race they were not to write to me.

"The long-looked-for day of their departure duly arrived.

"Two hansoms were drawn up, side by side, in front of the house. A white rose in my hair, I sat at the window. A parting smile, a wave of my handkerchief, and my lovers were off. In an instant they were out of sight.

"For a month they were out of mind too. After the exhausting emotions I had undergone, this period of my life was truly halcyon. I banished my lovers from my memory, and enjoyed what was left of the season and of my girlish freedom. In two months I should be an affianced wife, and it behoved me to make the best of my short span of spinsterhood. The season waned, fashion drifted to Cowes;

I was left alone in empty London. Then my thoughts sauntered back to the two travellers. As day followed day, my anxiety and curiosity mounted proportionately. The forty-eight days went by, but there was no wire. They passed slowly—oh, so slowly—into fifty, while I waited, waited, from dawn to midnight, with ears pricked up, for that double rat-tat which came not, or which came about something else. The sands of September dribbled out, and my fate still hung in the balance. I went about the house like an unquiet spirit.

"In imagination I was seeing those two men sweeping towards me—one from the East of the world, one from the West. And there I stood, rooted to the spot, while from either side a man was speeding inevitably towards me, across oceans and continents, through canals and tunnels, along deserts or rivers, pressing into his service every human and animal force, and every blind energy that man had tamed. To my fevered imagination I seemed to be between the jaws of a leviathan, which were closing upon me at a terrific rate, yet which took days and days to snap together, so wide were they apart, so gigantic was the monster. Which of the jaws would touch me first?

"The fifties mounted into the sixties, but there was no telegram. The tension became intolerable. Again and again I felt tempted to fly, but a lingering sense of honour kept me to my post.

"On the sixty-first day my patience was rewarded. Sitting at my window one morning, I saw a telegraph boy sauntering along. He reached the gate. He paused. I rushed to the door and down the steps, seized the envelope, and tore it frantically open :

"Coming, but suppose all over.—ARTHUR.

"I leaned against the gate, half fainting. When I returned to my room, I read the wire again, and noted it had been handed in at Liverpool. In four or five hours at most I should cease to belong to myself. I communicated the news to the Honourable Miss Primpole, who congratulated me cordially. She made no secret of her joy that the nobleman had won. For my part I was still torn with conflicting emotions. Now that I knew it was to be the one, I hankered after the other. Yet in the heart of the storm there was peace, in the thought that the long suspense was over. I ordered a magnificent repast to be laid for the home-coming voyager, which would also serve to celebrate our betrothal. The Honourable Miss Primpole consented to grace the board, and the butler to surrender the choicest vintages garnered in my father's cellar.

"Two hours and a half dragged by; then there came another wire. I opened it with some curiosity, but as my eye caught the words I almost swooned with excitement. It ran:

"Arrived, but presume too late.—ATHELSTAN.

"With misty vision I strove to read the place of despatch. It was Dover. A great wave of hope surged in my bosom. My saga-hero might yet arrive in time. Half-frenziedly I turned over the leaves of Bradshaw. No; after sending that wire he would just have missed the train to Victoria! Cruel! cruel! But stay! there was another route. He might have booked for Charing Cross. Yes! Heaven be praised! If he did that he would just catch a train. And of course he would do that—surely he would have planned out every possibility while crossing the Channel, have arranged for all—my Captain, my blue-eyed Berserker! But then Lord Arthur had had two and a half hours' start.

I turned to Liverpool, and essayed to discover whether that was sufficient to balance the difference of the two distances from London. Alas! my head swam before I had travelled two stations. There were no less than four routes —to Euston, to St. Pancras, to King's Cross, to Paddington! Still I made out that if he had kept his head very clear, and been very, very fortunate, he might just get level with the Captain. But then on a longer route the chances of accidental delays were more numerous. On the whole the odds were decidedly in favour of the Captain. But one thing was certain—that they would both arrive in time for supper. I ordered an additional cover to be laid, then I threw myself upon a couch and tried to read. But I could not. Terrible as was the strain, my thoughts refused to be distracted. The minutes crawled along—gradually peace came back, as I concluded that only by a miracle could Lord Arthur win. At last I jumped up with a start, for the shades of evening were falling, and my toilette was yet to make. I dressed myself in a dainty robe of white, trimmed with sprays of wild flowers, and I stuck the white rose in my hair—the symbol that I was yet unasked in wedlock, the white star of hope to the wayworn wanderer! I did my best to be the fairest sight the travellers should have seen in all the world.

"The Honourable Miss Primpole started when she saw me. 'What have you been doing to yourself, Princess?' she said. 'You're lovelier than I ever dreamed.'

"And indeed the crisis had lent a flush to my cheek and a flash to my eye which I would not willingly repay. My bosom rose and fell with excitement. In half-an-hour I should be in my saga-hero's arms!

"I went down to the ground-floor front, and seated myself at the open window, and gazed at the Square and the fiery streaks of sunset in the sky.

"The Honourable Miss Primpole lay upon an ottoman, less excited. Every now and again she asked:

"'Do you see anything, Princess?'

"'Nothing,' I answered.

"Of course she did not take my answer literally. Several times cabs and carriages rattled past the window, but with no visible intention of drawing up. Duskier, duskier grew the September evening, as I sat peering into the twilight.

"'Do you see anything, Princess?'

"'Nothing.'

"A moment after a hansom came dashing into sight—a head protruded from it. I uttered a cry and leant forward, straining my eyes.

"Captain Athelstan!

"Yes! No! No! Yes! No! NO!

"Will it be believed that (such is the heart of woman) I felt a sensation of relief on finding the issue still postponed? For, in the moment when the Captain seemed to flash upon my vision, it was borne in upon me like a chilling blast that I had lost my Voice. Never would that glorious music swell for me as I sat alone with my husband in the gloaming.

"The fiery streaks of sunset faded into grey ashes.

"'Do you see anything, Princess?

"'Nothing.'

"Even as I spoke I heard the gallop of hoofs in the quiet Square, and, half paralysed by the unexpected vision, I saw Lord Arthur dashing furiously up on horseback—Lord Arthur, bronzed and bearded and travel-stained, but Lord Arthur beyond a doubt. He took off his hat and waved it frantically in the air when he caught sight of my white figure, with the white rose of promise nestling in my hair. My poor saga-hero!

AT THE WINNING-POST.

"He reined in his beautiful steed before my window, and commenced his proposal breathlessly:

"'*W—w—w*——'

"Even Mr. Gladstone, if he had been racing as madly as Lord Arthur, might well have been flustered in his speech.

"The poor singer could not get out the first word, try as he would. At last it came out like a soda-water cork, and '*you*' with it. But at the 'be' there was—oh, dire to tell—another stoppage.

"'*B—b—b—b—b*——'

"'Fire! fire! Hooray!' The dull roar of an advancing crowd burst suddenly upon our ears, mingled with the more piercing exultation of small boys. The thunderous clatter of the fire-engine seemed to rock the soil of the Square.

"But neither of us took eyes off the other.

"'*Be!*' It was out at last. The end was near. In another second I should say 'Yes.'

"'Fire! fire!' shrieked the small boys.

"'*M—m—m—y.*'

"Lord Arthur's gallant steed shifted uneasily. The fire engine was thundering down upon it.

"'*W—w—w*——'

"'*Will you be*——' The clarion notes of the Captain rang out above the clatter of the fire-engine, from which he madly jumped.

"'*W—wife?*'
"'*Mine?*' } the two travellers exclaimed together.

"'Dead heat,' I murmured, and fell back in a dead faint. My overwrought nerves could stand no more.

. . . .

Nevertheless it was a gay supper-party; the air was thick with travellers' tales, and the butler did not spare the champagne. We could not help being tickled by the quaint termination of the colossal globe-trotting competition; and we soothed Lord Arthur's susceptibilities by declaring that if he had only remembered the shorter proposal formula employed by his rival, he would have won by a word. It was a pure fluke that the Captain was able to tie, for he had not thought of telegraphing for a horse, but had taken a hansom at the station, and only exchanged to the fire-engine when he heard people shouting there was a fire in Seymour Street. Lord Arthur obliged five times during the evening, and the Honourable Miss Primpole relaxed more than ever before, and accompanied him on the banjo. Before we parted I had been persuaded by my lovers to give them one last trial. That night three months I was to give another magnificent repast, to which they were both to be invited. During the interval each was to do his best to become famous, and at the supper-party I was to choose the one who was the more widely known throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom. They were to place before me what proofs and arguments they pleased, and I was to decide whose name had penetrated to the greater number of people. There was to be no appeal from my decision, nor any limitation to what the candidates might do to force themselves upon the universal consciousness, so long as they did not merely advertise themselves at so much a column or poster. They could safely be trusted not to do anything infamous in the attempt to become famous, and so there was no need to impose conditions. I had a secret hope that Lord Arthur might thus be induced to bring his talents before the world and get over his objection to the degradation of public appearances. My hope was more than justified. I grieve to say that neither strove to benefit his kind. His lordship went on the music-hall stage, made up as a costermonger, and devoted his wonderful voice and his musical genius to singing a Cockney ballad, with a chorus consisting of the words, 'Ba, ba, ba, boodle-dee,' repeated sixteen times. It caught on like a first-class epidemic — 'Ba, ba, ba, boodle dee' microbes floated in every breeze. The cholera-chorus raged from Piccadilly Circus to Land's End, from Kensington to John O'Groat's. The swarthy miners hewed the coal to it; it dropped from passing balloons; the sailors manned the capstan to it, and the sound of it superseded fog-horns. Duchesses danced to it, and squalid infants cried for it. Divines with difficulty kept it out of their sermons; philosophers drew weighty lessons from it; critics traced its history; and, as it didn't mean anything, the greatest Puritans hummed it inaccurately. 'Ba, ba, ba, boodle-dee,' sang Lord Arthur nightly at six halls and three theatres, incidentally clearing off all the debts on the family estates; and, like a flock of sheep, the great British public took up the bleat, and in every hall and drawing-room blossomed the big pearl buttons of the Cockney costermonger.

BA, BA, BA, BOODLE-DEE.

"But Captain Athelstan came to the front far more easily, if less profitably. He sent a testimonial to the Perfect Cure Elixir. The Elixir was accustomed to testimonials from the suffering millions. The spelling had generally to be corrected before they were fit for publication. It also received testimonials which were useless, such as, 'I took only one bottle of your Elixir, and I got fourteen days.' But a testimonial from a Captain of the Guards was a gold mine. The Captain was the best name the Elixir had ever had; and he had enjoyed more diseases than it had ever professed to cure. Astonished by its own success, the Elixir resolved to make a big spurt and kill off all its rivals.

"For the next few months, Captain Athelstan was rammed down the throats of all England. He came with the morning milk, in all the daily papers; he arrived by the first post in a circular; he stared at people from every dead wall when they went out to business; he was with them at lunch in little plaques and placards in every restaurant; he nodded at them in every bar; rode with them in every train and tram-car, either on the wall or on the back of the ticket; joined them at dinner in the evening papers, and supplied the pipe-lights after the meal; you took up a magazine, and found he had slipped between the sheets; you went to bed, and his diseased figure haunted your dreams. Life lost its sweetness, literature its charm. The loathsome phantasm of the complexly-afflicted Captain got between you and the sunshine. Stiff examination papers (compiled from the Captain) were set at every breakfast table, and you were sternly interrogated as to whether you felt an all-gone sensation at the tip of your nose, and you were earnestly adjured to look up your old diseases. You began to read an eloquent description of the Alps, and lo! there was the Captain perched on top. You started a thrilling story of the sea, and the Captain bobbed up from the bottom. You began a poetical allegory concerning the Valley of the Shadow, and you found the Captain had been living there all his life—till he came upon the Elixir. A little innocent child remarked, 'Pater, it is almost bath time,' and you felt for your handkerchief in view of a touching domestic idyll; but the Captain froze your tears. 'Why have sunstroke in India?' you were asked; and the Captain supplied the answer. Something came like a thief in the night; it was the Captain. You were startled to see that there was 'a blight over all creation,' but it turned out to be only the Captain. Everything abutted on the Captain—Shakespeare and the musical glasses, the Venus of Milo and the 'Mikado'; day and night and all the seasons, the potato harvest and the Durham coal strike, the advantages of early rising and the American Copyright Act. He was at the bottom of every passage, he lurked in every avenue, he was at the end of every perspective. The whole world was familiar with his physical symptoms, and his sad history. The exploits of Julius Cæsar were but a blur in the common mind, but everybody knew that the Captain's skin grew Gobelin blue; that the whites of his eyes turned green; that his tongue stuck in his cheek; and that the rest of his organism behaved with corresponding gruesomeness. Everybody knew how 'they dropped off, petrified by my breath'; and how his sympathetic friends told him in large capitals,

'YOU WILL NEVER GET BETTER, CAPTAIN';

and how his weeping mother, anxious to soothe his last hours, remarked, in reply to his request for another box of somebody else's pills, 'The only box you'll ever want will be a coffin'; how 'he thought it was only cholera,' but how one dose of the Elixir (which new-born babies clamoured for in preference to their mother's milk) had baffled all their prognostications and made him a celebrity for life.

"In private the Captain said that he really had these ailments, though he only discovered the fact when he read the advertisements of the Elixir. But the mess had an inkling that it was all done for a wager, and christened him 'The Perfect Cure.' To me he justified himself on the ground that he had scrupulously described himself as having his tongue in his cheek, and that he really suffered from love-sickness, which was worse than all the ills the Elixir cured.

"I need scarcely say that I was shocked by my lovers' practical methods of acquiring that renown for which so many gifted souls have yearned in vain, though I must admit that both gentlemen retained sufficient sense of decorum to be revolted by the other's course of action. They remonstrated with each other gently but firmly.

"The result was that their friendship snapped, and a week before the close of the competition they crossed the Channel to fight a duel. I got to hear of it in time, and wired to Boulogne that if they killed each other, I would marry neither; that if only one survived, I would never marry my lover's murderer; and that a duel excited so much gossip, that, if both survived, they would be equally famous and the competition again a failure.

"These simple considerations prevented any mishap. The Captain returned to his regiment, and Lord Arthur went on to the Riviera to while away the few remaining days, and to get extra advertisement out of not appearing at his halls through indisposition. At Monte Carlo he accidentally broke the bank, and explained his system to the interviewers.

"To my chagrin, for I was tired of see-sawing, this brought him level with the Captain again. I had been prepared to adjudicate in favour of the latter, on the ground that although 'Ba, ba, ba, boodle-dee' was better known than the Patent Cure Elixir, yet the originator of the song remained unknown to many to whom the Captain was a household word, and this in despite of the extra attention secured to Lord Arthur by his rank. The second supper-party was again sicklied over with the pale cast of thought. 'No more competitions!' I said. 'You seem destined to tie with each other instead of with me. I will return to my original idea. I will give you a task which it is not likely both will perform. I will marry the man who asks me, provided he comes to me neither walking nor riding, neither sailing nor driving, neither skating nor sliding nor flying, neither by boat nor by balloon nor by bicycle, neither by swimming nor by floating, nor by anybody carrying or dragging or pushing him, neither by any movement of hand or foot nor by any extraordinary method whatever. Till this is achieved neither of you must look upon my face again.'

"They looked aghast when I set the task. They went away, and I have not seen them from that day to this. I shall never marry now, so I may as well devote myself to the cause of the Old Maids you are so nobly championing."

She rolled up the MS.

"But," said Lillie excitedly, breaking in for the first time, "what is the way you want them to come?"

The Princess laughed a silvery laugh.

"No way. Don't you understand? It was a roundabout way of saying I was tired of them."

"Oh!" said Lillie.

"You see I got the idea from a fairy tale," said the

Princess. "There the doer evaded the conditions by being dragged at a horse's tail. I have guarded against this, so that now the thing is impossible."

Again her mischievous laughter rang through the misanthropic room.

Lillie smiled too. She felt certain Lord Silverdale would find no flaw in the Princess's armour, and she was exultant at so auspicious an accession. For the sake of formality, however, she told her that she would communicate her election by letter.

The next day a telegram came to the Club: "*Compelled to withdraw candidature. Feat accomplished.—Princess, Hôtel Métropole, Brighton.*"

Equally aghast and excited, Lillie wired back: "*How?*" and prepaid the reply.

"*Lover happened to be here. Came up in lift as I was waiting to go down.*"

Still intensely piqued by curiosity and vexation, Lillie telegraphed: "*Which?*"

"*Leave you to guess,*" answered the electric current.

CHAPTER VI

THE GRAMMAR OF LOVE

THE *Moon* man's name was Wilkins, and he did nine-tenths of the interviews in that model of the new journalism. Wilkins was the man to catch the weasel asleep, hit off his features with a kodak, and badger him the moment he awoke as to why he went pop. Wilkins lived in a flat in Chancery Lane, and had his whiskey and his feet on the table when Silverdale turned the handle of the door in the twilight.

"What do you want?" said Wilkins gruffly.

"I have come to ask you a few questions," said Silverdale politely.

"But I don't know you, sir," said Wilkins stiffly. "Don't you see I'm busy?"

"It is true I am a stranger; but remember, sir, I shall not be so when I leave. I just want to interview you about that paragraph in the *Moon*, stating——"

"Look here!" roared Wilkins, letting his feet slide from the table with a crash. "Let me tell you, sir, I have no time to listen to your impertinence. My leisure is scant and valuable. I am a hard-worked man. I can't be pestered with questions from inquisitive busybodies. What next, sir? What I write in the *Moon* is my business and nobody else's. Damn it all, sir, is there to be nothing private? Are you going to poke and pry into the concerns of the very journalist? No, sir, you have wasted your time as well as mine. We never allow the public to go behind what appears in our paper."

"But this is a mere private curiosity—what you tell me shall never be published."

"If it could be, I wouldn't tell it you. I never waste copy."

"Tell me—I am willing to pay for the information—who wrote the paragraph about Clorinda Bell and the Old Maids' Club?"

"Go to the devil!" roared Wilkins.

"I thought you would know more than he," said Silverdale, and left. Wilkins came down-stairs on his heels in a huff, and walked towards Ludgate Hill. Silverdale thought he would have another shot, and followed him unseen. The two men jumped into a train, and after an endless-seeming journey arrived at the Crystal Palace. A monster balloon was going off from the grounds. Herr Nickeldorf, the great aeronaut, was making in solitude an experimental night excursion to Calais, as if anxious to meet his fate by moonlight alone. Wilkins rushed up to Nickeldorf, who was standing among the ropes giving directions.

"Go avay!" said Nickeldorf, when he saw him, "I haf noding to say to you. You make me *schwitzen*." He jumped into the car and bade the men let go.

Ordinarily Wilkins would have been satisfied with this ample material for half a column, but he was still in a bad temper, and, as the car was sailing slowly upwards, he jumped in, and the aeronaut gave himself up for pumped. In an instant, moved by an irresistible impulse, Silverdale gave a great leap and stood by the *Moon* man's side. The balloon shot up, and the roar of the crowd became a faint murmur as the planet flew from beneath their feet.

"Good evening, Mr. Wilkins," said Lord Silverdale. "I should just like to interview you about——"

"You jackanapes!" cried the *Moon* man, pale with anger. "If you don't go away at once, I'll kick you down-stairs."

"My dear Mr. Wilkins," suavely replied Lord Silverdale, "I will willingly go down, provided you accompany me. I am sure Herr Nickeldorf is anxious to drop both of us."

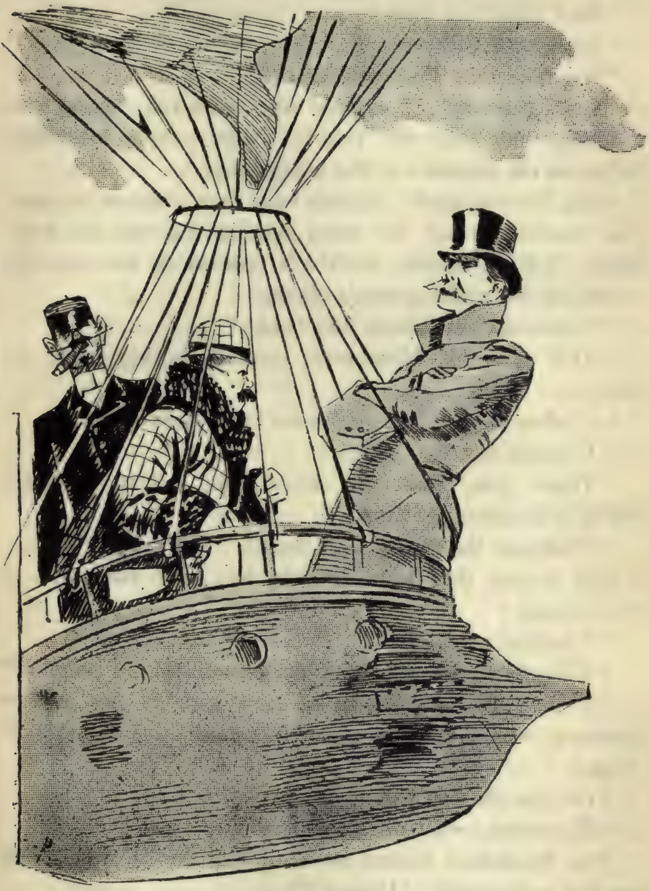
"*Gewiss!*" replied the aeronaut.

"Well, lend us a parachute," said Silverdale.

"No, tanks. Peoples never return parachutes."

"Well, we won't go away without one. I forgot to bring mine with me. I didn't know I was going to have such a high old time."

"By what right, sir," said Mr. Wilkins, who had been struggling with an attack of speechlessness, "do you persecute me like this? *You* are not a member of the Fourth Estate."



"GO AWAY, OR I'LL KICK YOU DOWN-STAIRS."

"No, I belong merely to the Second."

"Eh? what?—a Peer!"

"I am Lord Silverdale."

"No, indeed? Lord Silverdale!"

"Lord Silverdale!" echoed the aeronaut, letting two sand-bags fall into the clouds. Most people lose their ballast in the presence of the aristocracy.

"Oh, I am so glad! I have long been anxious to meet your lordship," said the *Moon* man, taking out his note-book. "What is your lordship's opinion of the best fifty books for the working man's library?"

"I have not yet written fifty books."

"Ah!" said the *Moon* man, carefully noting down the reply.

"And when is your lordship's next book coming out?"

"I cannot say."

"Thank you," said the *Moon* man, writing it down. "Will it be poetry or prose?"

"That is as the critics shall decide."

"Is it true that your lordship has been converted to Catholicism?"

"I believe not."

"Then how does your lordship account for the rumour?"

"I have an indirect connection with a sort of new nunnery, which it is proposed to found—the Old Maids' Club."

"Oh yes, the one that Clorinda Bell is going to join."

"Nonsense! who told you she was going to join?"

The *Moon* man winced perceptibly at the question, as he replied indignantly, "Herself!"

"Thank you. That's what I wanted to know. You may contradict it on the authority of the President. She only said so to get an advertisement."

"Then why give her two by contradicting it?"

"That is the woman's cleverness. Let her have the advertisement, rather than that her name should be connected with Miss Dulcimer's."

"Very well. Tell me something, please, about the Club?"

"It is not organised yet. It is to consist of young and beautiful women vowed to celibacy, to remove the reproach of the term 'Old Maid.'"

"It is a noble idea!" said the *Moon* man enthusiastically. "Oh, what a humanitarian time we are having!"

"Lord Silverdale," said Herr Nickeldorf, who had been listening with all his ears, "I haf to you given de hospitality of my balloon. Vill you, in return, take *meine Frau* into de Old Maids' Club?"

"As a visitor? With pleasure, as she is a married woman."

"*Nein, nein.* I mean as an Old Maid. *Ich kann sie nicht mehr gebrauchen.* I do not require her any longer."

"Ah, then, I am afraid we can't. You see she *isn't* an Old Maid!"

"But she haf been."

"Ah, yes, but we do not recognise past services."

"Oh, *warum* wasn't de Club founded before I married?" groaned the old German. "*Himmel*, vat a terrible mistake! It is to her I owe it dat I am de most celebrated aeronaut in *der ganzen Welt.* It is de only profession in vich I escape her *sicherlich.* She haf de *Kopf* too *schwach* to rise mit me. *Ach*, when I com *auf* here, it is *Himmel.*"

"Rather taking an unfair rise out of your partner, isn't it?" queried the *Moon* man, with a sickly smile.

"And vat vould you haf done in—*was sagt man*—in my boots?"

The *Moon* man winced.

"Not put them on."

"You are not yourself married?"

The *Moon* man winced.

"No, I'm only engaged."

"*Mein Herr*," said the old German solemnly, "I haf noding but drouble from you. You make to me mein life von burden. But I cannot see you going to de altar widout putting out de hand to safe you. It vas *dumm* to yourself engage at all—but now dat you haf committed de mistake, shtick to it!"

"How do you mean?"

"Keep yourself engaged. Change not your condition any more." He pulled the valveline and relapsed into silence.

"What do you say, Lord Silverdale?" said the *Moon* man anxiously.

"I am hardly an authority. You see I have so rarely been married. It depends on the character of your betrothed. Does she long to be of service in the world?"

The *Moon* man winced.

"Yes, that's why she fell in love with me. Thought a *Moon* man must be all noble sentiments like the *Moon* itself!"

"She is, then, young," said Silverdale musingly. "Is she also beautiful?"

The *Moon* man winced.

"Bewitching. Why does your lordship ask?"

"Because her services might be valuable as an Old Maid."

"Oh, if you could only get Diana to see it in that light!"

"You seem anxious to be rid of her?"

"I do. I confess it. It has been growing on me for some time. You see hers is a soul perpetually seeking more light. She is always asking questions. This thirst for information would be made only more raging by marriage. You know what Stevenson says,—'To marry is to domesticate the Recording Angel.' At present my occupations keep me away from her—but she answers my letters with as many queries as a 'Constant Reader.' She wants to know all I say. do, or feel, and I never see her without having to submit to a string of inquiries. It's like having to fill up a census paper once a week. If I don't see her for a fortnight she wants to know how I am the moment we meet. If this is so before marriage, what will it be after, when her opportunities of button-holing me will be necessarily more frequent?"

"But I see nothing to complain of in that!" said Lord Silverdale. "Tender solicitude for one's betrothed is the usual thing with those really in love. You wouldn't like her to be indifferent to what you were doing, saying, feeling?"

The *Moon* man winced.

"No, that's just the dilemma of it, Lord Silverdale. I am afraid your lordship does not catch my drift. You see, with another man, it wouldn't matter; as your lordship says, he would be glad of it. But to me all that sort of thing's 'shop. And I hate 'shop.' It's hard enough to be out interviewing all day, without being reminded of it when you get home and want to put your slippers on the fender and your feet inside them, and be happy. No, if there's one thing in this world I can't put up with, it's 'shop' after business hours. I want to forget that I get my gold in exchange for notes of interrogation. I shudder to be reminded that there are such things in the world as questions—I tremble if I hear a person invert the subject and predicate of a sentence. I can hardly bear to read poetry, because the frequent inversions make the lines look as if they were going to be inquisitive. Now you understand why I was so discourteous to your lordship, and I trust that you will pardon the curt expression of my hyper-sensitive feelings. Now, too, you understand why I shrink from the prospect of marriage, to the brink of which I once bounded so heedlessly. No; it is evident a life of solitude must be my portion. If I am ever to steep my wearied spirit in forgetfulness of my daily grind, if my nervous system is to be preserved from premature break-down, I must have no one about me who has a right of interrogation, and my housekeeper must prepare my meals without even the preliminary 'Chop or Steak, sir?' My home-life must be restful, peaceful, balsamic—it must exhale a papaverous aroma of categorical propositions."

"But is there no way of getting a wife with a gift of categorical conversation?"

"Please say, 'There is no way, etc,' for unless you yourself speak categorically, the sentences grate upon my ear. I can ask questions myself, without experiencing the slightest inconvenience, but the moment I am myself interrogated, every nerve in me quivers with torture. No, I am afraid it is impossible to find a woman who will eschew the interrogative form of proposition, and limit herself to the affirmative and negative varieties; who will, for mere love of me, invariably place the verb after the noun, and unalterably give the subject the precedence over the predicate. Often and often, when my Diana in all her dazzling charms looks up pleadingly into my face, I feel towards her as Ahasuerus felt towards the suppliant queen Esther, and I yearn to stretch out my reporter's pencil towards her, and to say, 'Ask what you will — even if it be half my income — so long as you do not ask a question.'"

"But isn't there—I mean there is—such a thing obtainable as a dumb wife!"

"Mutes are for funerals, not for marriages. Besides, then, everybody would be asking me why I married her. No; the more I think of it, the more I see the futility of my dream of matrimonial felicity. Why, a question lies at the very threshold of marriage—'Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?'—and to put up the banns is to loose upon yourself an interviewer in a white tie. No, leave me to my unhappy destiny. I must dree my weird. And anything your lordship can do in the way of enabling me to dree it, by soliciting my Diana into the Old Maids' Club, shall be received with the warmest thanksgiving, and will allow me to remain your lordship's most grateful and obedient servant, Daniel Wilkins."

"Enough!" said Lord Silverdale, deeply moved. "I will send her a circular. But do you really think you would be happy if you lost her?"

"If!" said the *Moon* man moodily. "It would require a great many 'ifs' to make me happy. As I once wrote:

If cash were always present,
  And business always paid;
If skies were always pleasant,
  And pipes were never laid;
If toothache emigrated,
  Dyspepsia disappeared,
And babies were cremated,
  And boys and girls were speared;
If shirts were always creamy,
  And buttons never broke;
If eyes were always beamy,
  And all could see a joke;

If ladies never fumbled
  At railway-ticket holes;
New villas never crumbled,
  And lawyers boasted souls;
If beer was never swallowed,
  And cooks were never drunk,
And trades were never followed,
  And thoughts were never thunk;
If sorrow never troubled,
  And pleasure never cloyed,
And animals were doubled,
  And humans all destroyed;—
Then—if there were no papers,
  And more words rhymed with "giving"—
Existence *might* be capers,
  And life be worth the living.

"Your lordship might give me a poem in exchange," concluded the *Moon* man conceitedly. "An advance-quote from your next volume, say."

"Very well." And the peer good-naturedly began to recite the first fytte of an old English romance:

Ye whyte moon sailed o'er ye dark-blue vault,
  And safelie steered 'mid ye fleet of starres,
And threw down smiles to ye antient salt,
  While Venus flyrtede with wynkynge Mars.
Along ye sea-washed slipperie slabbes
  Ye whelkes were stretchynge their weary limbs,
While prior to going to bedde ye crabbes
  Were softlie chaunting their evenynge hymnes.

At this point a sudden shock threw both bards off their feet, inverting them in a manner most disagreeable to the *Moon* man. While they were dropping into poetry, the balloon had been dropping into a wood, and the aeronaut had thrown his grapnel into the branches of a tree.

"What's the matter?" they cried.

"*Alles* shtand out here for London!" said the Herr phlegmatically, "unless you vant to go mit me to Calais. In five minutes I shall be overgoing de Channel."

"No, no, put us down," said the *Moon* man. "I never *could* cross the Channel. Oh, when are they going to make that tunnel?" Thereupon he lowered himself into the tree, and Lord Silverdale followed his example.

"*Gute Nacht!*" said the Herr. "Folkestone should be someveres about. Fortunately, de moon shines, and you may be able to find it!"

"I say!" shrieked the *Moon* man, as the balloon began to free itself on its upward flight, "How far off is it?"

"I vill not be—*wie heisst es gleich?*—interviewed. *Gute Nacht.*"

Soon the great sphere was no bigger than a star in the heavens.

"This is a nice go," said the *Moon* man, when they had climbed down.

"Oh, don't trouble. I know the south-east coast well. There is sure to be a town within a four-mile radius."

"Then let us take a hansom," said the *Moon* man.

"Wilkins, are you—I mean you are—losing your head," said Lord Silverdale. And, linking the interviewer's arm in his, he fared forth into the darkness.

"Do you know what I thought," said Wilkins, as they undressed in the lonely roadside inn (for ballooning makes us acquainted with strange bed-fellows), "when I was sliding down the trunk, with you on the branches above?"

"No—what did you—I mean you did think what!"

"Well, I'm a bit superstitious, and I saw in the situation a forecast of my future. That tree typifies my genealogical tree; for when I have grown rich and prosperous by my trade, there will be a peer perched somewhere on the upper branches. Debrett will discover him."

COMING DOWN FROM THE CLOUDS.

"Indeed, I hope so," said the peer fervently, "for in the happy time when you shall have retired from business you will be able to make Diana happy."

CHAPTER VII

THE IDYL OF TREPOLPEN

"No, we can't have Diana," the President said, when Lord Silverdale reported the matter. "That is, not if the *Moon* man breaks off the engagement. According to the rules, the candidate must have herself discarded an advantageous marriage, and that Miss Diana will give up Mr. Wilkins is extremely questionable."

"Like everything connected with the *Moon* man's bride. However, my aerial expedition has not been fruitless; if I have not brought you a member from the clouds, at least we know how right I was to pluck Clorinda Bell."

"Yes, and how right I was to appoint you Honorary Trier!" said Lillie. "I have several more candidates for you, chosen from my last batch of applications. While you were in the clouds I was working. I have already interviewed them. They fulfil all the conditions. It only remains for you to do your part."

"Have they given good reasons for their refusal to marry their lovers?"

"Excellent reasons. Reasons so strange as to bear the stamp of truth. Here is the first reduced to writing. It is compounded of what Miss Ellaline Rand said to me and of what she left unsaid. Read it, while I put another of these love stories into shape. I am so glad I founded the Old

Maids' Club. It has enlarged my experience incalculably."

Lord Silverdale took the manuscript, and read :—

"When John Beveridge went to nurse his misanthropy in the obscure fishing village of Trepolpen, he had not bargained for the presence of Ellaline Rand. And yet there she was, living in a queer little cottage on the very top of the steep hill which constituted Trepolpen, and sloped down to a pebbly beach where the dark nets dried and the trawl boats were drawn up. The people she was staying with were children of the soil and the sea—the man, a rugged old fish-dealer who had been a smuggler in his time; the woman, a chirpy grandame whose eyes were still good enough to allow her to weave lace by lamp-light. The season was early June, and the glittering smile on the broad face of the Atlantic made the roar of the breakers sound like stentorian laughter. There was always a whiff of fish—a blend of mackerel and crabs and mullet—striking up from the beach, but the salt in the air kept the odoriferous atoms fairly fresh. Everything in Trepolpen was delightfully archaic, and even the far-away suggestions of antiquity about the prevailing piscine flavour seemed in poetic keeping with the spirit of the primitive little spot.

"In a village of one street it is impossible not to live in it, unless you are a coastguard, and then you don't live in the village. This was why John Beveridge was a neighbour of Ellaline's. He lived much lower down, where the laugh of the Atlantic was louder and the scent of the fish was stronger; and before he knew of Ellaline's existence he used to go downhill (which is easy) to smoke his pipe and chat with the trawlers and lie on his back in the sun. After they had met, he grew less lazy and used to take exercise by walking up to the top of the hill. Probably by this time the sea-breezes had given him strength. Sometimes he met Ellaline coming down; which was accident. Then he would turn and walk down with her; which was design. The manner of their first meeting was novel, but in such a place it could not be long delayed. Beveridge had obeyed a call from the boatmen to come and help them drag in the seine. He was tugging with all his might at a section of the netting, for the fishers seemed to be in luck and the fish unfortunate. Suddenly he heard the pit-pat of light feet running down the hill, and the next moment two little white hands peeping out of white cuffs were gripping the net at the side of his own fleshy brown ones. For some thirty seconds he was content to divine the apparition from the hands. There was a flutter of sweet expectation about his heart, a stirring of the sense of romance.

"The day was divine. The sky was a brooding blue; the sea was a rippling play of light on which the seine-boat danced lightly. One little brown sail was visible far out in the bay, the sea-gulls hovering about it. It seemed to Beveridge that the scene had only been waiting for those gentle little hands, whose assistance in the operation of landing the spoil was such a delicious farce. They could be no native lass's, these soft fingers with their pink little nails like pretty sea-pearls. They were fingers that spoke (in their mute digital dialect) of the crayon and the violin-bow, rather than of the local harmonium. There was something, too, about the coquettish cuffs, irresistibly at variance with the village Wesleyanism. Gradually, as the net came in, Beveridge let his eyes steal towards her face. The prevision of romance became a certainty. It was a charming little face, as symmetrically proportioned to the hands as the face of a watch is. The nose was *retroussé* and piquant, but the eyes contradicted it, being demure and dreamy. There was a little Cupid's bow of a mouth, and between the half-parted rosy lips a gleam of white teeth clenched with the exertion of hauling in the seine. A simple sailor's hat crowned a fluff of flaxen hair, and her dress was of airy muslin.

"She was so absorbed in the glee of hauling in the fish, that it was some moments before she seemed to notice that her neighbour's eyes were fixed upon her, and that they were not set in the rugged tan of the local masculine face. A little blush leapt into the rather pale cheeks, and went out again like a tiny spurt of rosy flame. Then she strained more desperately than ever at the net. It was soon ashore, with its wild and whirling mixture of mackerel, soles, dabs, squids, turbot—John Beveridge was not certain but what his heart was already among the things fluttering there in the net at her feet!

"While the trawlers were sorting out the fish, spreading some on the beach and packing the mackerel in baskets, Ellaline looked on, patently interested in everything but her fellow amateur. After all, despite his shaggy coat and the clay pipe in his mouth, he was of the town, towny; some solicitor, artist, stockbroker, doctor, on a holiday; perhaps, considering the time of the year, only a clerk. What she had come to Trepolpen for was something more primitive. And he! Surely he had seen and loved pretty women enough, not to stir an inch nearer this dainty vision. For what but to forget the wiles and treacheries of women of the town had he buried himself here? And yet, was it the unexpectedness—was it that, while bringing back the atmosphere of great cities, she yet seemed a creature of the woods and waters—he felt himself drawn to her? He wanted to talk to her, to learn who she was and what she was doing here, but he did not know how to begin, though he had the gift of many tongues. Not that he deemed an introduction necessary—in Trepolpen, where not to give everybody you met 'good morning' was to court a reputation for surliness. And it would have been easy enough to open on the weather, or the marine harvest they had both helped to gather in. But somehow John Beveridge learnt embarrassment in the presence of this muslined mermaiden, who seemed half of the world and half of the sea. And so, amid the bustle of the beach, the minutes slipped away and Beveridge spoke no word, but leaned against the cliff, content to drowse in the light of the sun and Ellaline.

"The dealers came down to the beach—men and women —among them a hale, grizzly old fellow, who clasped Ellaline's hand in his huge, gnarled fist. The auction began. John Beveridge joined the crowd at a point behind the strangely assorted couple. Of a sudden Ellaline turned to him with her great limpid eyes looking candidly into his, and said, 'Some of those poor mackerel are not quite dead yet—I wonder if they suffer?' John Beveridge was taken aback. The last vestiges of his wonted assurance were swept away before her sweet simplicity.

"'I—I—really—I don't know—I've never thought about it,' he stammered.

"'Men never do,' said Ellaline, with a gentle reproachful look. 'They think only of their own pain. I do hope fish have no feelings.'

"'They are cold-blooded,' he reminded her, beginning to recover himself.

"'Ah!' she said musingly. 'But what right have we to take away their lives? They must be—oh, so happy!—in the beautiful wide ocean!—I am sorry I had a hand in destroying them. I shall never do it again.'

"'You have very little to reproach yourself with,' he said, smiling.

"'Ah! now you are laughing at me. I know I'm not big and strong, and that my muscles could have been dispensed with. But the will was there, the intention was there,' she said, with her serious air.

"'Oh, of course you are a piscicide in intention,' he admitted. 'But you will enjoy the mackerel all the same.'

"'No, I won't,' she said, with a charming little shake of the head. 'I won't eat any.'

"'What! you will never more eat fish?'

"'Never,' she said emphatically. 'I love fish, but I won't eat 'em! only tinned things, like sardines. Oh, what a little stupid I am! Don't laugh at me again, please. I forgot the sardines must be caught first, before they are tinned, mustn't they?'

"'Not necessarily,' he said. 'It often suffices if sprats are caught.'

"She laughed. Her laugh was a low musical ripple, like one of the little sunlit waves translated into sound.

"'Twenty-two shillings!' cried the owner of a lot.

"'I'll give 'ee eleven!' said Ellaline's companion; and the girl turned her head to listen to the violent chaffering that ensued, and when she went away she only gave John Beveridge a nod and a smile. But he followed her with his eyes as she toiled up the hill, growing ever smaller and daintier against the horizon. The second time he met her was at the Cove, a little way from the village, where great foliage-crowned cliffs came crescent-wise round a space of shining sand, girdled at its outer margin by tumbling, green, foam-crested surges. Huge mammoth-like boulders stood about, bathing their feet in the incoming tide, the cormorants perching on their pachydermatous backs. John Beveridge came slowly and cautiously down the precipitous half-worn path that led to the sands. There was a point at which the landward margin of the shore beneath first revealed itself to the descending pedestrian, and it was a point so slippery that it was thoughtless of Fate to have included Ellaline in the area of vision. She was lying, sheltered by a blue sunshade, on the golden sand, with her head against the base of the cliff, abstractedly tearing a long serpentine weed to dark green ribbons, and gazing out dreamily into the throbbing depths of sea and sky. There w an open book before her, but she did not seem to be reading. John Beveridge saved himself by grasping a stinging bush, and he stole down gently towards her, forgetting to swear.

"He came to her with footsteps muffled by the soft sand, and stood looking down at her, admiring the beauty of the delicate flushed young face and the flaxen hair against the sober background of the aged cliff with its mellow subtly-fused tints.

"'Thinking of the little fishes—or of the gods?' he said at last, in a loud, pleasant voice.

"Ellaline gave a little shriek.

"'Oh, where did you spring from?' she said, half raising herself.

"'Not from the clouds,' he said.

"'Of course not. I was *not* thinking of the gods,' said Ellaline.

"He laughed. 'I am not even a Perseus,' he said, 'for the tide, though coming in, is not yet dangerous enough to be likened to the sea-monster, though you might very well pass for Andromeda.'

"Ellaline blushed and rose to her feet, adjusting a wrap round her shoulders. 'I do not know,' she said, with dignity, 'what I have done to encourage such a comparison.'

" John Beveridge saw he had slipped. This time there was not even a stinging bush to cling to.

" 'You are beautiful, that is all I meant,' he said apologetically.

" 'Is it worth while saying such commonplace things?' she said, a little mollified.

" It was an ambiguous remark. From her it could only mean that he had been guilty of compliment.

" 'I am very sorry. A thousand pardons. But pray do not let me drive you away. You seemed so happy here. I will go back.' He made a half-turn.

" 'Yes, I was happy,' she said simply. 'In my foolish little way I thought I had discovered this spot—as if anything so beautiful could have escaped the attention of those who have been near it all their lives.'

" Her words caused him a sudden pang of anxious jealousy. Must they not be true of herself?

" 'And you too seem to have discovered it?' she went on. 'Doubtless you know all the coast well, for you were here before me. Do you know,' she said, looking up at his face with her candid grey eyes, 'this is the first time in my life I have seen the sea, so you must not laugh if I seem ignorant; but oh, how I love to lie and hear it roar, tossing its mane like some great wild animal that I have tamed and that will not harm me.'

" 'There are other wild animals that you may tame, here by the sea,' he said.

" She considered for a moment gravely.

" 'That is rather pretty,' she announced. 'I shall remember that. But please do not tell me again I am beautiful.' She sat down on the sand, with her back to the cliff, re-adjusting her parasol.

"'Very well. I sit reproved,' he replied, taking up his position by her side. 'What book is that you are reading?'

"She handed him the little paper-covered, airily-printed volume, suggesting summer in every leaf.

"'Ah, it is *The Cherub That Sits Up Aloft!*' he said, with a shade of superciliousness blent with amusement.

"'Yes; have you read it?' she asked.

"'No,' he said; 'I have heard of it. It's by that new woman who came out last year, and calls herself Andrew Dibdin, isn't it?'

"'Yes,' said Ellaline. 'It made an enormous hit, don't you know?'

"'Oh yes, I know,' he said, laughing. 'It's a lot of sentimental rot, isn't it? Do you like it?'

"'I think it is sweetly pretty,' she said, a tear drop of vexation gathering on her eye-lid. 'If you haven't read it, why should you abuse it?'

"'Oh, one can't read everything,' he said. 'But one gets to pick up enough about a book to know whether he cares to read it. Of course, I am aware it is about a little baby on board a ship, that makes charming inarticulate orations, and is worshipped by everybody, from the captain to the little stowaway, and is regarded by the sailors as the sweet little cherub that sits up aloft, etc., and that there is a sensational description of a storm at sea—which is Clark-Russell and water, or rather Clark-Russell and more water.'

"'Ah, I see you're a cynic,' said Ellaline. 'I don't like cynics.'

"'No, indeed, I am not,' he pleaded. 'It is false, not true, sentiment I object to.'

"'And how do you know this is false sentiment?' she asked, in honest indignation, 'when you haven't read it?'

"'What does it matter?' he murmured, overwhelmed by her sense of duty. She was evidently unaccustomed to the light flippancies of elegant conversation.

"'Oh, nothing. To some people nothing matters. Will you promise to read the book if I lend it you?'

"'Of course I will,' he said, delighted at the establishment of so permanent a link. 'Only I don't want to deprive you of it—I can wait till you have finished with it.'

"'I have finished. I have read it over and over again. Take it.' She handed it to him. Their finger-tips met.

"'I recant already,' he said. 'It must have something pure and good in it to take captive a soul like yours.'

"And indeed the glamour of Ellaline was over every page of it. As he read, he found tears of tenderness in his eyes, when otherwise they might have sprung from laughter. He adored the little cherub who sat up aloft on the officers' table, and softened those crusty sea-dogs whose hearts were become as ship's biscuits. He could not tell what had come over himself, that his own sere heart should be so quick again to the beauties of homely virtue and duty, to the engaging simplicity and pathos of childhood, to the purity of womanhood. Was it that Ellaline was all these things incarnate?

"He avowed his error and his conversion, and gradually they came to meet often in the solitary creek, as was but right for the only two intellectual people in Trepolpen. Sometimes, too, they wandered further afield, amid the ferny lanes. But the Cove was their favourite trysting-place, and there, lying with his head in her lap, he would talk to her of books and men and one woman.

"He found her tastes were not limited to *The Cherub That*

F. H. TOWNSEND 1897.

TALKED TO HER OF BOOKS AND MEN AND ONE WOMAN.

Sits Up Aloft, for she liked Meredith. 'Really,' he said, 'if you had not been yourself, I should have doubted whether your admiration was genuine.'

"'Yes, his women are so real. But I do not pretend to care for the style.'

"'Style!' he said; 'I call it a five-barred fence. To me style is everything. Style alone is literature, whether it be the man or not.'

"'Oh, then, you are of the school of Addiper?'

"'Ah, have you heard of that? I am. I admire Addiper, and agree with him. Form is everything—literature is only a matter of form. And a book is only a form of matter.'

"'I see,' she said, smiling. 'But I adore Addiper myself, though I regret the future seems likely to be his. I have read all he has written. Every line is so lucid. The form is exquisite. But as for the matter——!'

"'No matter!' summed up John Beveridge, laughing heartily.

"'I am so glad you agree with me sometimes,' said Ellaline. 'Because it shows you don't think I am so very stupid after all.'

"'Of course I don't—except when you get so enthusiastic about literary people, and rave about Dibdin and Addiper and Fladpick, and the rest. If you mixed with them, my little girl, as I have done, you would soon lose your rosy illusions. Although perhaps you are better with them.'

"'Ah, then you're not a novelist yourself?' she said anxiously.

"'No, I am not. What makes you ask?'

"'Nothing. Only sometimes, from your conversation, I suspected you might be.'

"'Thank you, Ellaline,' he said, 'for a very dubious compliment. No, I am afraid I must forgo that claim upon your admiration. Unless I tell a lie and become a novelist by doing so. But then wouldn't it be the truth?'

"'Are you, then, a painter or a musician?'

"He shook his head. 'No, I do not get my living by art.'

"'Not of any kind?'

"'Not of any kind.'

"'How *do* you get it?' she asked simply, a candid light shining in the great grey eyes.

"'My father was a successful saddle-maker. He is dead.'

"'Oh!' she said.

"'Leather has made me from childhood up—it has chastised, supported, educated me, and given me the *entrée* everywhere. So you see I cannot hold a candle to your demi-gods.'

"'Ah, but there is nothing like leather,' said Ellaline, and stroked the head in her lap reassuringly.

"The assurance permeated John Beveridge's frame like a pleasant cordial. All that was hard and leathery in him seemed to be soaked soft. Here, at last, was a woman who loved him for himself—an innocent trusting woman, in whose weakness a man might find strength. Her pure lips were like the wayside well at which the wearied wanderer from great stony cities might drink and be refreshed. And yet, delightful as her love would be in his droughty life, he felt that his could not prove less delightful to her. That he, John Beveridge, with the roses thrusting themselves into his eyes, should stoop to pick the simple little daisy at his feet, could not fail to fill her with an admiring gratitude that would add the last charm to her passion for him.

"But it was not till a week afterwards that the formal proposal, so long impending, broke. They were resting in a lane, and discussing everything they didn't want to discuss, the unspoken playing with subtle sweetness about the spoken.

"'Have you read Mr. Gladstone's latest?' she asked at last.

"'No,' he said; 'has Mr. Gladstone ever a latest?'

"'Oh yes; take him hour by hour, like an evening paper. I'm referring to his article on "Ancient Beliefs in a Future State."'

"'What's that—the belief of old maids that they'll get married?'

"'Now you are blasphemous,' she cried, with a pretty pout.

"'How? Are old maids a sacred subject?'

"'Everything old should be sacred to us,' she said simply. 'But you know that is not what I mean.'

"'Then why do you say it?' he asked.

"'Oh, what a tease you are!' she cried. 'I shan't be sorry to be quit of you. Your flippancy is quite dreadful.'

"'Why, do you believe in a future state?' he said.

"'Of course I do. If we had only one life, it would not be worth living.'

"'But nine times one life *would* be worth living. Is that the logic? If so, happy cats! I wonder,' he added irrelevantly, 'why the number nine always goes with cats—nine lives, nine tails, nine muses?'

"Ellaline made a *moue*, and shrank petulantly away from him. 'I will not discuss our future state, unless you are prepared to do it seriously,' she said.

"'I am,' he replied, with sudden determination. 'Let us enter it together. I am tired of the life I've been leading, and I love you.'

"'What!' she said, in a little horrified whisper. 'You want us to commit suicide together?'

"'No, no—matrimony. I cannot do it alone—I have never had the courage to do it at all. With you at my side, I should go forward, facing the hereafter cheerfully, with faith and trust.'

"'I—I—am—afraid—I——' she stammered.

"'Why should you be afraid?' he interrupted. 'Have you no faith and trust in me?'

"'Oh yes,' she said, with a frank smile. 'If I had not confidence in you, I should not be here with you.'

"'You angel!' he said, his eyes growing wet under her clear, limpid gaze. 'But you love me a little, too?'

"'I do not,' she said, shaking her head demurely.

"John Beveridge groaned. After so decisive an avowal from the essence of candour, what remained to be said? Nothing but to bid her and his hopes farewell—the latter at once, the former as soon as she was escorted back to Trepolpen. His affection had grown so ripe, he could not exchange it for the green fruit of friendship. And yet, was this to be the end of all that sweet idyllic interlude——a jarring note, and then silence for evermore?

"'But could you never learn to love me?'

"She laughed her girlish ringing laugh.

"'I am not so backward as all that,' she said. 'I mastered it in a dozen lessons.'

"He stared at her, a wild hope kindling in his eyes. 'Did I hear aright?' he asked, in hoarse tones.

"She nodded, still smiling.

"'Then I did not hear aright before?'

"'Oh yes, you did. I said I did not love you a little. I love you a great deal.'

"There were tears in the grey eyes now, but they smiled on. He caught her in his arms, and the Devonshire lane was transformed to Eden. How exquisite this angelic frankness, when the words pleased! How delicious the candour of her caress when words were *de trop!*

"But at last she spoke again. 'And now that I know you love me for myself, I will teli you a secret.' The little hands that had first clasped his attention were laid on his shoulders, the dreamy face looked up tenderly and proudly into his. 'They say a woman cannot keep a secret,' she said. 'But you will never believe that again, when I tell you mine?'

"'I never believed it,' he said earnestly. 'Consider how every woman keeps the great secret of her age.'

"'Ah, that is not what I am going to tell you,' she said archly. 'It is another of the great secrets of my age. You remember that book you liked so much—*The Cherub That Sits Up Aloft?*'

"'Yes!' he said wonderingly.

"'Well, I wrote it!'

"'You!' he exclaimed, startled. His image of her seemed a pillar of sand upon which the simoom had burst. This fresh simple maiden a complex literary being, a slave of the midnight lamp!

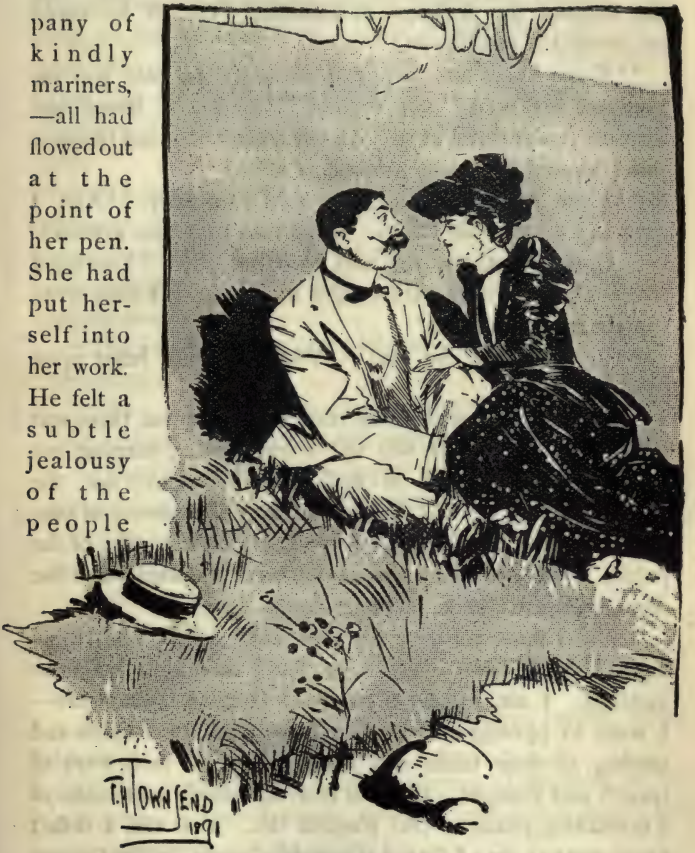
"'Yes, I—I am Andrew Dibdin—the authoress who drew tears from your eyes.'

"'You Andrew Dibdin?' he repeated mechanically.

"She nodded her head with a proud and happy smile. 'I knew you would be pleased; but I wanted you to love me, not my book.'

"'I love both,' he exclaimed. The new conceptions had quickly fitted themselves into the old. He saw now what the charm of the little novel was—the book was Ellaline between covers. He wondered he had not seen it before.

The grace, the purity, the pathos, the sweet candour, the recollections of a childhood spent on the great waters in the company of kindly mariners,—all had flowed out at the point of her pen. She had put herself into her work. He felt a subtle jealousy of the people who bought her on the bookstalls for a shilling—or even



THE CONFESSION OF ELLALINE.

for ninepence at the booksellers'. He wanted to have her all to himself. He experienced a mad desire to buy up the edition. But then there would be a new one. He realised the feelings of Othello. Oh, if he could but arrest her circulation!

"'If you knew how happy it made me to hear you say you love my book!' she replied. 'At first I hated you because you sneered at it. All my friends love my books—and I wanted you to be a friend of mine.'

"'I am more than that,' he said exultantly. 'And I want to love all your books. What else have you written?'

"'Only two others,' she said apologetically. 'You see I have only been in literature eight months, and I only write straight from the heart.'

"'Yes, indeed!' he said. 'You wear your heart upon your leaves.'

"Jealous as he was of her readers, he felt that there was balm in Gilead. She was not a hack-writer, turning out books for the market of malice aforethought; not the complex being he had figured in the first moment of consternation, the literary quack with finger on the pulse of the public. She did but write as the birds carolled—less the slave, than the genius, of the midnight lamp.

"'But I must not wear my heart out,' she replied, laughingly. 'So I came down here for a month to get fresh material. I am writing a novel of Cornish peasant life—I want to photograph the people with all their lights and shades, all their faiths and superstitions, all their ways of speech and thought,—the first thorough study ever made of a fast-fading phase of Old English life. You see, I didn't know what to do: I feared the public would be tired of my sailor-stories, and I thought I'd locate my next story on land. Accident determined its environment. I learnt, by chance, that we had some poor relatives in Trepolpen, whom my people had dropped, and so I thought I'd pick them up again, and turn them into "copy," and I welcomed the opportunity of making at the same time the acquaintance of the sea, which, as I think I told you, I have never seen before. You see I was poor myself till *The Cherub That Sits Up Aloft* showered down the gold, and, being a Cockney, I had never been able to afford a trip to the seaside.'

"'My poor Ellaline!' he said, kissing her candid lips. She was such an inveterate truth-teller that he could only respect and admire and adore—though she fell from heaven. Her candour infected him. He felt an overwhelming paroxysm of veracity.

"The mask could be dropped now: did she not love John Beveridge?

"'Now I see why you rave so over literary people!' he said. 'You are dipped in ink yourself.'

"'Yes,' she said, with a happy smile, 'there is nobody I admire so much as our great writers.'

"'But you would not love me more, if I were a great writer!' he said anxiously.

"'No, certainly not. I couldn't,' she said decisively.

"He stooped and kissed her gratefully. 'Thank you for that, my sweet Ellaline. And now I think I can safely confess that I am Addiper.'

"She gave a little shriek. Her face turned white. 'Addiper!' she breathed.

"'Yes, dearest, it is my *nom de guerre*. I am Addiper, the writer you admire so much, the man with whose school you were pleased to say the future lies.'

"'Addiper!' she said again. 'Impossible! why, you said you did not get your living by art of any kind?'

"'Of course I don't!' he said. 'Books like mine—all style, no sentiment morals or theology—never pay. Fortunately I am able to publish them at my own expense. I write only for writers. That is why *you* like me. Successful writers are those who write for readers, just as popular painters are those who paint for spectators.'

"The poor little face was ashen grey now. The surprise was too much for the fragile little beauty. 'Then you really are Addiper?' she said, in low slow tones.

"'Yes, dearest,' he said, not without a touch of pride. 'I am Addiper—and in you, love, I have found a fresh fount of inspiration. You shall be the guiding star of my work—my rare Ellaline, my pearl, my beryl. Ah, this is a great turning-point in my life. To-day I enter into my third manner.'

"'This is not one of your teasing jokes?' she said appealingly, her piteous eyes looking up into his.

"'No, my Ellaline. Do you think I would hoax you thus—to dash you to earth again?'

"'Then,' she said slowly and painfully, 'then I can never marry you. We must say "good-bye."'

"Her lover gazed at her in dazed silence. The butterflies floated in the summer air, a bee buzzed about a wayside flower, from afar came the tinkle of a brook. A deep peace was on all things—only in the hearts of the two *littérateurs* was pain and consternation.

"'You can never marry me!' repeated John Beveridge at last. 'And why not?'

"'I have told you. Because you are Addiper.'

"'But that is no reason.'

"'Is it not?' she said. 'I thought Addiper would have a subtler apprehension.'

"'But what is it you object to in me?'

"'To your genius, of course.'

"'To my genius!'

"'Yes; no mock modesty. Between authors it won't do. Every author must know very well he stands apart from the world, or he would not set himself to paint it. I know quite well I am not as other women. What is the use of paltering with one's consciousness?'

"Still the same delicious candour shone in the grey eyes. John Beveridge, not at all grasping his dismissal, felt an unreasonable impulse to kiss them.

"'Well, supposing I am a genius,' he said instead, 'where's the harm?'

"'No harm till you propose to yoke me with it. I never will marry a genius.'

"'Oh, don't be so absurd, Ellaline!' he said. 'You've been reading the foolish nonsense about geniuses necessarily making bad husbands. No doubt in some prominent instances geniuses have not been working models of the domestic virtues, but, on the other hand, there are scores of instances to the contrary. And blockheads make quite as bad husbands as your Shelleys and your Byrons. Besides, it was only in the past that geniuses were blackguards; to-day it is the correct thing to be correct. Respectability now-a-days adds chastity to studies from the nude; marital fidelity enhances the force of poems of passion; and philanthropy adds the last touch to tragic acting. So why should I suffer for the sins of my predecessors? If I may judge myself by my present sensations, what I am gifted with is a genius for domesticity. Do not sacrifice me, dearest, to an unproved and unscientific generalisation.'

"'It is not of that I am thinking,' Ellaline replied, shaking her head sadly. 'In my opinion, the woman who refused Shakespeare merely on the ground that he wrote Shakespeare's Works, should be sent to Coventry as a coward. No, do not fancy I am that. I may not be strong, but I have courage enough to marry you, if that were all. It is not because I am afraid you would make me unhappy.'

"'Ah, there is something you are hiding from me,' he said anxiously, impressed by the gravity and sincerity of her tones.

"'No, there is nothing. I cannot marry you because you are a genius.'

"He saw what she meant now. She had been reading the modern works on genius and insanity.

"'Ah, you think me mad?' he cried.

"'Mad—when you love me?' she said, with a melancholy smile.

"'You know what I mean. You think that "great wits to madness nearly are allied;" that sane as I appear there is in me a hidden vein of madness. And yet, if anything, the generalisation connecting genius with insanity is more unsound than that connecting it with domestic infelicity. It would require a genius to really prove such a connection, and as he would, on his own theory, be a lunatic, what becomes of his theory?'

"'Your argument involves a fallacy,' replied Ellaline quietly. "It does not follow that if a man is a lunatic everything he says or does has the taint of madness. A genius who held that genius meant insanity might be sane just on this one point.'

"'Or insane just on the one point. Seriously, Ellaline,' said John Beveridge, beginning to lose his temper, 'you don't mean to say that you believe that genius is really a degenerative psychosis of the epileptoid order. If you do you must be mad yourself, that's all I can say.'

''Of course I should have to admit I am mad myself if I held the theory that genius meant insanity. But I don't.'

"'You don't!' he said, staring blankly at her. 'You don't believe I'm insane, and you don't believe I'll make a bad husband—I should be insane if I did, my sweet little Ellaline. And you still wish to cry off?'

"'I must.'

"'Then you no longer love me!'

"'Oh, I beg of you do not say that! You do not know how hard it is for me to give you up—do not make our parting harder.'

"'Ellaline, in Heaven's name, vex me no further. What is this terrible mystery? Why can you no longer think of me?'

"'If you only thought of me a little you would guess. But men are so selfish. If it were only you that had genius, the thing would be simple. But you forget that I too——' She paused; a little modest blush completed the sentence.

"'Yes, I know you are a genius, my rare Ellaline. But what then?' he cried, 'I only love you the more for it.'

"'Yes; but if we marry,' said Ellaline, 'we two geniuses, look what will happen.'

"He stared at her afresh—she met his gaze unflinchingly. 'What new scientific bogie have you been conjuring up?' he murmured.

"'Oh, I wish you would drive science out of your head,' she replied pettishly. 'What have I to do with science? Really, if you go on so stupidly, I shall believe you are not a genius after all.'

"'And then you will marry me?' he said eagerly.

"'Don't be so stupid! To speak plainly—for you seem as dull as a clodhopper to-day—I cannot afford to marry a genius, and a recognised genius to boot. I am only a struggling young authoress, with a considerable following, it is true, but still without an unquestioned position. The high-class organs that review you all to yourself still take me as one of a batch, and are not always as complimentary as they might be. The moment I marry you, and my rushlight is hidden in your bushel, out it goes. I become absorbed simply in you, a little satellite circling round your planetary glory. I shall have no independent existence—the fame I have toiled and struggled for will be eclipsed in yours. "Mrs. Addiper—the wife of the celebrated writer, scribbles a little herself, don't you know! Wonder what he could see in her." That's how people will talk of me. When I go into a room, we shall be announced, "Mr. and Mrs. Addiper"; and everybody will rush round you and hang on your words, and I shall be talked to only by way of getting you at second-hand, as a medium through which your personality is partially radiated. And parties will be given "to meet Mr. Addiper," and I shall accompany you for the same reason that your dress-coat will—because it is the etiquette.'

"'But, Ellaline——' he protested.

"'Let me finish. I could not even afford to marry you if my literary position were equal to yours. Such a union would do nothing to enhance my reputation. No woman of genius should marry a man of genius—were she even the greater of the two she would become merged in him, even as she would take his name. The man I must marry, the man I have been waiting to fall in love with and be loved by, is a plain honest gentleman, unknown to fame and innocent of all aspiration but that of making me happy. He must devote his life to mine, sink himself in me, sacrifice himself on the altar of my fame, live only for the

"SO RAN MY INMOST MAIDEN DREAM."

enhancement of my reputation. Such a man I thought I had found in you—but you deceived me. I thought, here is a man who loves me only for myself, but whose love will increase tenfold when he learns that I stand on a pedestal of glory, and who will rejoice at the privilege of passing the rest of his days uplifting that pedestal to the gaze of the world, a man who will say of me what I can hardly say of myself, who will drive the bargains with my publishers, wrap me up against the knowledge of malicious criticisms, conduct my correspondence, receive inconvenient callers, arrange my interviews, and send incessant paragraphs to the papers about me, commencing Mrs. John Beveridge (Andrew Dibdin), varied by Andrew Dibdin (Mrs. John Beveridge). Here is a man who will be a living gratuitous advertisement, inserted daily in the great sheet of the times, a steadfast column of eulogy, a pillar of praise. Here is a man who will be as much a halo as a husband. When I enter a drawing-room with him (so ran my innocent maiden dream), there will be a thrill of excitement; everybody will cluster round me; he will efface himself or be effaced; and, even if he finds anybody to talk to, it is about me he will talk. Invitations to our own "At Homes" will be eagerly sought after—not for his sake, but for mine. All that is famous in literature and art will crowd our *salon* —not for his sake, but for mine. And while I shall be the cynosure of every eye, it will be his to jot down the names of the illustrious gazers, in Society paragraphs beginning Mrs. John Beveridge (Andrew Dibdin), alternating with Andrew Dibdin (Mrs. John Beveridge). And am I to give up all this merely because I love you?'

"'Yes, why not?' he said passionately. 'What is fame, reputation, weighed against love? What is it to be on the world's lips, if the lips we love are to be taken away?'

"'How pretty!' she said, with simple admiration. 'If you will not claim the phrase, I should like to give it to my next heroine.'

"'Claim it?' he said bitterly. 'I do not want any phrases—I want you.'

"'Do you not see it is impossible? If you could become obscure again, it might be. You say fame is nothing weighed against love. Come, now, would you give up your genius, your reputation, just to marry me?'

"He was silent.

"'Come,' she repeated. 'I have been frank with you, have I not?'

"'You have,' he admitted, with a melancholy grimace.

"'Well, be equally frank with me. Would you sacrifice these things to your love for me?'

"'I could not if I would.'

"'But would you if you could?'

"He did not answer.

"'Of course you wouldn't,' she said. 'I know you as I know myself.'

"'What is the use of thinking of what can never be?' he said impatiently.

"'Just so. That is what I say. I can never give you my hand; so give me yours, and we'll turn homewards.'

"He gave her his hand, and she jumped lightly to her feet. Then he got up and shook himself, and looked, still in a sort of daze, at the gentle face and the dainty figure.

"He seized her passionately by the arms.

"'And must this be the end?' he cried hoarsely.

"'Finis,' she said decisively, though the renewed pallor of her face showed what it cost her to complete the idyl.

"'An unhappy ending?' he said, in hopeless interrogation.

"'It is not my style,' she said simply, 'but after all this is only real life.'

"He burst forth in a torrent of half-reproachful regrets—he, Addiper, the chaste, the severe, the self-contained.

"'And you, the sweet innocent girl who won the heart I no longer hoped to feel living,—you would coldly abandon the love for whose existence you are responsible. You, who were to be so fresh and pure an influence on my work, are content to deprive literature of those masterpieces our union would have called into being. Oh, but you cannot unshackle yourself thus from my life—for good or evil your meeting with me determined my third manner. Hitherto I thought it was for good; now I fear it will be for evil.'

"'You seem to have forgotten *all* your manners,' she said, annoyed. 'And if our meeting was for evil, at least our parting shall be for good.'

"John Beveridge and Ellaline Rand spake no more, but walked home in silence through the country lanes, on which the sunlight seemed to lie cold. The past was but a dream — not for these two the simple emotions which cross with joy or sorrow the web of common life. At the cottage near the top of the hill, where the sounds and scents of the sea were faintest, they parted. The idyl of Trepolpen was ended.

"And John Beveridge went down-hill."

CHAPTER VIII

MORE ABOUT THE CHERUB

THE trial interview between Lord Silverdale and Ellaline Rand took place in the rooms of the Old Maids' Club, in the presence of the President. Lillie, encouraged by the rush of candidates, occupied herself in embroidering another epigrammatic anti-macassar—"It is man who is vain of woman's dress." She had deliberately placed herself out of earshot. To Miss Rand, Lord Silverdale was a casual visitor with whom she had drifted into conversation, yet she behaved as prettily as if she knew she was undergoing the *vivâ voce* portion of the examination for entranceship.

There are two classes of flirts—those who love to flirt, and those who flirt to love. There is little to be said against the latter, for they are merely experimenting. They intend to fall in love, but they can hardly compass it without preliminary acquaintance, and by giving themselves a wide and varied selection are more likely to discover the fitting object of affection. It is easy to confound both classes of flirts together, and heart-broken lovers generally do so, when they do not use a stronger expression. But, so far as Lord Silverdale could tell, there was nothing in Miss Rand's behaviour to justify him in relegating her to either class, or to make him doubt the genuineness of the anti-hymeneal feelings provoked by her disappointment in Trepolpen. Her manner was simple and artless; she gushed, indeed, but charmingly, like a daintily-sculptured figure on a marble fountain in a fair pleasaunce. You could be as little offended by her gush as by her candid confessions of her own talents. The Lord had given her a good conceit of herself, and given it her so gracefully that it was one of her chiefest charms. She spoke with his lordship of Shakespeare and others of her profession, and mentioned that she was about to establish a paper called *The Cherub*, after her popular story *The Cherub That Sits Up Aloft.*

"I want to get into closer touch with my readers," she explained, helping herself charmingly to the chocolate creams. "In a book, you cannot get into direct *rapport* with your public: your characters are your rivals, and distract attention from the personality of the author. In a journal I shall be able to chat with them freely, open my heart to them, and gather them to it. There is a legitimate curiosity to learn all about me—the same curiosity that I feel about other authors. Why should I allow myself to be viewed in the refracting medium of alien ink? Let me sketch myself to my readers, tell them what I eat and drink, how I write and when, what clothes I wear and how much I pay for them, what I think of this or that book of mine, of this or that character of my creation, what my friends think of me, and what I think of my friends. All the features of the paper will combine to make my face; I shall occupy all the stories, and every column will have me at the top. In this way I hope not only to gratify my yearning for sympathy, but to stimulate the circulation of my books. Nay more, with the eye of my admirers thus encouragingly upon me, I shall work more zealously. You see, Lord Silverdale, we authors are a race apart—without the public hanging upon our words we are like butterflies in a London fog, or actors playing to an empty auditorium."

"I have noticed that," said Lord Silverdale dryly. "Before authors succeed, it takes them a year to write a book; after they succeed it takes them only a month."

"You see I am right," said Ellaline eagerly. "That's what the sun of public sympathy does. It ripens work quickly."

"Yes; and when the sun is very burning, it sometimes takes the authors no time at all."

"Ah, now you are laughing at me. You are speaking of 'ghosts.'"

"Yes. Ghost stories are published all the year round—not merely at Christmas. Don't think I'm finding fault. I look upon an author who keeps his ghost as I do on a tradesman who keeps his carriage. It is a sign he has succeeded."

"Oh, but it's very wicked, giving the public underweight like that!" said Ellaline, in her sweet, serious way. "How can anybody write as well as yourself? But why I mentioned about the *The Cherub* is because it has just struck me the paper might become the organ of the Old Maids' Club, for I should make a point of speaking freely of my aims and aspirations in joining it. I presume you know all about Miss Dulcimer's scheme?"

"Oh yes. But I don't think it feasible."

"You don't?" she said, with a little tremor of astonishment in her voice. "And why not?" She looked anxiously into his eyes for the reply.

"The candidates are too charming to remain single," he explained, smiling.

She smiled back a little at him, those sweet grey eyes still looking into his.

"*You* are not a literary man?" she said irrelevantly.

"I am afraid I must plead guilty to trying to be," he said. "The evidence is down in black and white."

The smile died away, and for an instant Ellaline's brow went into black for it. She accepted an ice from Turple the Magnificent, but took her leave shortly afterwards, Lillie promising to write to her.

"Well?" said the President, when she was left alone with the Honorary Trier.

That functionary looked dubious. "Up till the very last she seemed single-hearted in her zeal. Then she asked whether I was a literary man. You know her story. What do you conclude?"

"I can hardly come to a conclusion. Do you think there is still a danger of her marrying to get some one to advertise her?"

"I think it depends on *The Cherub*. If *The Cherub* is born and lives, it will be a more effectual advertising medium than even a husband, and may replace him. A paper of your own can puff you rather better than a husband of your own—it has a larger circulation and more opportunities. An authoress-editress—her worth is far above rubies! Her correspondents praise her in the gates, and her staff shall rise up and call her blessed. It may well be that she will arrive at that stage at which a husband is an incubus and marriage a manacle. In that day the honour of the Club will be safe in her hands."

"What do you suggest, then?" said Lillie anxiously.

"That you wait till she is delivered of *The Cherub* before deciding."

"Very well," she replied resignedly. "Only I hope we shall be able to admit her. Her conception of the use of man is so sublime!"

Lord Silverdale smiled. "Ah, if the truth were known," he said, "I daresay it would be that pretty women regard man merely as a beast of draught and burden, a creature to draw their cheques and carry their cloaks."

Lillie answered, "And men look on pretty women either as home pets or as drawing-room decorations."

Silverdale said further, "I do not look on you as either."

To which Lillie, "Why do you say such obvious things? It is unworthy of you. Have you nothing worthy of you in your pockets to-day?"

"Nothing worthy of your hearing. Just a little poem about another cherub."

AN ANCIENT PASSION

Mine is no passion of to-day,
  Upblazing like a rocket;
To-morrow doomed to die away
  And leave you out of pocket.

Nor is she one who snared my love
  By just the woman's graces;
I loved her when, a sucking dove,
  She cooed and made grimaces.

And when the pretty darling cried,
  I often stooped and kissed her,
Though cold and faint her lips replied,
  As though she were my sister.

I loved her long but loved her still
  When she discarded long-clothes,
Yet here, if she had had her will,
  Would this romantic song close.

For though we wandered hand in hand,
  Companions close and chronic,
She always made me understand
  Her motives were Platonic.

She said me "Nay" with merry mien,
  Not weeping like the cayman,
When she was Mab, the fairy Queen,
  And I Tom King, highwayman.

'Twas at a Children's Fancy Ball
  I got that first rejection;
It did not kill my love at all,
  But heightened its complexion.

My love to tell, when she grew up,
  Necessitates italics.
Her hair was like the butter-cup
  (Corolla not the calyx).

Her form was slim, her eye was bright,
  Her mouth a jewel-casket,
Her hand it was so soft and white
  I often used to ask it.

And so from year to year I wooed,
  My passion growing fiercer,
Though she in modest maiden mood
  Addressed me as "My *dear* sir."

At twenty she was still as coy,
  Her heart was like Diana's;
The future held for me no joy
  Save smoking choice Havannahs.

At last my perseverance woke
  A sweet responsive passion,
And of her love for me she spoke
  In woman's wordless fashion.

I told her, when her speech was done,
  The task would be above her
To make a happy man of one
  Who long had ceased to love her.

REJECTED ADDRESSES.

Lillie put on an innocently analytical frown. "I think you behaved very badly," she exclaimed. "You might have waited a little longer."

"Do you think so? Then I will leave you to your labours," said Lord Silverdale, with his wonted irrelevancy. Lillie sat for a long time with pen in hand, thinking without writing. As a change from writing without thinking, this was perhaps a relief.

"A penny for your thoughts!" said the millionaire, stealing in upon her reflections.

Lillie started and blushed.

"I am not Ellaline Rand," she said, smiling. "Wait till *The Cherub* comes out, and you will get hers at that price."

"Was Ellaline the girl who has just gone?"

"Did you see her? I thought you were gardening."

"So I was, but I happened to go into the dining-room for a moment and saw her from the window. I suppose she will be here often?"

"I suppose so," said Lillie dubiously.

The millionaire rubbed his hands.

"Miss Eustasia Pallas," announced Turple the Magnificent.

"A new candidate, probably," said the President. "Father, you must go and play in the garden!"

The millionaire left the room meekly.

CHAPTER IX

OF WIVES AND THEIR MISTRESSES

"No, no," said Miss Eustasia Pallas; "you misapprehend me. It is not because it would be necessary to have a husband and a home of one's own, that I object to marriage, but because it would be impossible to do without servants. While a girl lives at home, she can cultivate her soul while her mother attends to the *ménage.* But after marriage the higher life is impossible. You must have servants. You cannot do your own dirty work—not merely because it is dirty, but because it is the thief of time. You can hardly get literature, art, music, and religion adequately into your life even with the whole day at your disposal, but if you had to make your own bed too, I am afraid you wouldn't find time to lie on it."

"Then why object to servants?" inquired Lillie.

"Because servants are the asphyxiators of the soul. But for them I should long since have married."

"I do not quite follow you. Surely if you had servants to relieve you of all the grosser duties, the spiritual could then claim your undivided attention?"

"Ah, that is a pretty theory. It sounds very plausible. In practice, alas! it does not work. Like the servants. I have kept my eyes open almost from the first day of my life. I have observed my mother's household and other people's—I speak of the great middle-classes mainly; my unalterable conviction is that every faithful wife who aspires to be housekeeper too, becomes the servant of her servants. They rule not only her but all her thoughts. Her life circles round them. She can talk of nothing else. Whether she visits or is visited, servants are the staple of her conversation. Their curious habits and customs, their love-affairs, their *laches*, their impertinences,—these gradually become the whole food of thought, ousting every higher aim and idea. I have watched a girl—my bosom-friend at Girton—deteriorate from a maiden to a wife, from a wife to a bondswoman. First she talked Shelley, then Charley, then Mary Ann. Gradually her soul shrank. She lost her character. She became a mere parasite on the back kitchen, a slave to the cook's drink and the housemaid's followers. Those who knew my mother before she was married speak of her as a bright bonny girl, all enthusiasm and energy, interesting herself in all the life of her day and even taking a side in politics. But when I knew her, she was haggard and narrow. She never read, nor sang, nor played, nor went to the Academy. The greatest historical occurrences left her sympathies untouched. She did not even care whether Australia or England conquered at cricket, or whether Browning lived or died. You could not get her to discuss Whistler or the relations of Greek drama to "Gaiety" burlesque, or any other subject that interests ordinary human beings. She did not want a vote. She did not want any alteration in the divorce laws. She did not want Russia to be a free country, or the Empire to be federated. She did not want darkest England to be supplied with lamps. She did not want the working classes to lead better and nobler lives. She did not want to preserve the commons or to abolish the House of Lords. She did not want to do good or even to be happy. All she wanted was a cook or a housemaid or a coachman, as the case might be, and she was perpetually asking all her acquaintance if they knew of a good one, or had heard of the outrageous behaviour of the last.

"In her early married days, my father's income was not a twentieth of what it is to-day, and so she was fairly happy with only one servant to tyrannise over her. But she always had hard mistresses, even in those comparatively easy years. Poor mother! One scene remains vividly stamped upon my mind. We had a girl named Selina, who would not get up in the morning. We had nothing to complain of in the time of her going to bed,—I think she went about nine,—but the earliest she ever rose was eight, and my father always had to catch the eight-twenty train to the city, so you may imagine how much breakfast he got. My mother spoke to Selina about it nearly every day, and Selina admitted the indictment. She said she could not help it, she seemed to dream such long dreams and never wake up in the middle. My mother had had such difficulty in getting Selina that she hesitated to send her away and start hunting for a new Selina, but the case seemed hopeless.

"The winter came on, and we took to sending Selina to bed at six o'clock, so that my father might be sure of a hot cup of coffee before leaving home in the morning. But she said the mornings were so cold and dark it was impossible to get out of bed, though she tried very hard and did her best. I think she spent only nine hours out of bed on the average. My father gave up the hope of breakfast. He used to leave by an earlier train and get something at a restaurant. This grieved my mother very much—she calculated it cost her a bonnet a month. She became determined to convert Selina from the error of her ways.

"She told me she was going to appeal to Selina's higher nature. Reprimand had failed, but the soul that cannot be coerced can be touched. That was in the days when my mother still read poetry and was semi-independent.

"One bleak bitter dawn, my mother rose shivering, dressed herself, and went down into the kitchen, to the entire disconcertion of the chronology of the black beetles. She made the fire and put the kettle on to boil and swept the kitchen. She also swept the breakfast-room and lighted the fire and laid the breakfast. Then she sat down, put on a saintly expression, and waited for Selina.

"An hour went by, but Selina did not make her appearance. The first half-hour passed quickly, because my mother was busy thinking out the exact phrases in which to touch her higher nature. It required tact. A single clumsy turn of language, and she might offend Selina instead of elevating her. It was really quite a literary effort, the adequate expression of my mother's conception of the dignity and pathos of the situation,—in fact, it was that most difficult branch of literature—the dramatic—for my mother constructed the entire dialogue, speaking for Selina as well as for herself. Like all leading ladies, especially when they write their own plays, my mother allotted herself the 'tag,' and the last words of the duologue were:

"'There! there! my good girl! Dry your eyes. The past shall be forgotten. From to-morrow a new life shall begin. Come, Selina! Drink that nice hot cup of tea—don't cry and let it get cold. *That's* right.'

"The second half-hour was rather slower, my mother listening eagerly for Selina's footsteps, and pricking up her ears at every sound. The mice ran about the wainscotting, the kettle sang blithely, the little flames leapt in the grate, the kitchen and the breakfast-room were cheerful and redolent of the goodly savours of breakfast. A pile of hot toast lay upon a plate. Only Selina was wanting.

"All at once my mother heard the hall-door bang, and, running to the window, she saw a figure going out into the grey, freezing fog. It was my father hurrying to catch his train. In the excitement of the experiment my mother had forgotten to tell him that, for this morning at least, breakfast could be had at home. He might have had such beautiful tea and coffee, such lovely toast, such exquisite eggs,—and there he was hastening along in the raw air on an empty stomach! My mother rapped on the panes with her knuckles, but my father was late and did not hear. Her own soul a little ruffled, my mother sat down again in the kitchen and waited for Selina. Gradually she forgot her chagrin—after all, it was the last time my father would ever have to depart breakfastless. She went over the dialogue again, polishing it up and adding little touches.

"I think it was past nine when Selina left her bedroom, unwashed and rubbing her eyes. By that time my mother had thrice resisted the temptation to go up and shake her, and it was coming on a fourth time when she heard Selina's massive footstep on the stair. Instantly my mother's irritation ceased. She reassumed her look of sublime martyrdom. She had spread a nice white cloth on the kitchen table, and Selina's breakfast stood appetisingly upon it. Tears came into her eyes as she thought of how Selina would be shaken to her depths by the sight.

"Selina threw open the kitchen door with a peevish push, for she disliked having to get up so early in these cold, dark winter mornings, and vented her irritation even upon insensitive woodwork. But when she saw the deep red glow of the fire, instead of the dusky chillness of the normal morning kitchen, she uttered a cry of joy, and, rushing forwards, warmed her hands eagerly at the flame.

"'Oh, thank you, missis!' she said, with genuine gratitude.

"Selina did not seem at all surprised. But my mother did. She became confused and nervous. She forgot her words, as if from an attack of stage-fright. There was no prompter; and so for a moment my mother remained speechless.

"Selina, having warmed her hands sufficiently, drew her chair to the table, and lifted the cosy from the teapot.

"'Why, you've let it get cold,' she sighed reproachfully, feeling the side of the pot.

"This was more than my mother could stand.

"'It's you that have let it get cold,' she cried hotly.

"Now this was impromptu 'gag,' and my mother would have done better to confine herself to the rehearsed dialogue.

"'Oh, missis!' cried Selina, 'how can you say that? Why, this is the first moment I've come down!'

"'Yes!' said my mother, gladly seizing the opportunity of slipping back into the text. 'Somebody had to do the work, Selina. In this world no work can go undone. If those whose duty it is do not do it, it must fall on the shoulders of other people. That is why I got up at seven this morning instead of you, and have tidied up the place and made the master's breakfast.'

"'That was real good of you!' exclaimed Selina, with impulsive admiration.

"My mother began to feel that the elaborate set piece was going off in a damp sort of way, but she kept up her courage and her saintly expression and continued:

"'It was freezing when I got out of my warm bed, and before I could get the fire alight here, I almost perished with cold. I shouldn't be surprised if I have laid the seeds of consumption.'

"'Ah,' said Selina, with satisfaction. 'Now you see what I have had to put up with.' She took another piece of toast.

"Selina's failure to give the cues extremely disconcerted my mother. Instead of being able to make the high moral remarks she had intended, she was forced to invent repartees on the spur of the moment. The ethical quality of these improvisations was distinctly inferior.

"'But you are paid for it, I'm not,' she retorted sharply.

"'I know. That is why I say it is so good of you,' replied Selina, with inextinguishable admiration. 'But you'll reap the benefit of it! Now that I've had my breakfast without any trouble I shall be able to go about my work a deal better. It's such a struggle to get up, missis, it tires me out for the day, I assure you. Might I have another egg?'

"My mother savagely pushed her another egg.

"'I'm thinking it would be a good plan,' said Selina, meditatively opening the egg with her fingers, 'if you would get up instead of me every morning. But perhaps that was what you were thinking of?'

"'Oh, you would like me to, would you?' said my mother.

"'I should be very grateful, I should indeed,' said Selina earnestly, 'and I'm sure the work would be better done. There don't seem to be a speck of dust anywhere,'—she rubbed her dirty thumb admiringly along the dresser,—'and I'm sure the tea and toast are lots nicer than any I've ever made.'

"My mother waved her hand deprecatingly, but Selina continued: 'Oh yes, you know they are. You have often told me I was no use at all in the kitchen. I don't need to be told of my shortcomings, missis,—all you say of me is quite true. You would be ever so much more satisfied if you cooked everything yourself,—I'm sure you would.'

"'And what would *you* do under this beautiful scheme?' inquired my mother, with withering sarcasm.

"'I haven't thought of that yet,' said Selina simply. 'But no doubt, if I looked around carefully, I should always find something to occupy me. I couldn't be long out of work, I feel sure.'

"Well, that was how my mother's attempt to elevate Selina by moral means came to be a fiasco. The next time she tried to elevate her, it was by physical means. My mother left the suburbs, and moved to a London flat very near the sky. She had given up hopes of improving Selina's matutinal habits, and made the breakfast hour later, through my father having now no train to catch, but she thought she would cure her of followers. Selina's flirtations were not confined to our tradespeople and the local constabulary. She would exchange remarks about the weather with the most casual pedestrian in trousers. My mother thought she would remove her from danger by raising her high above all earthly temptations. We made the tradesmen send up their goods by lift, and the only person she could flirt with was the old lift-attendant. My father grumbled a good deal in the early days because the lift was always at the other extreme when he wanted it, but Selina's moral welfare came before all other considerations.

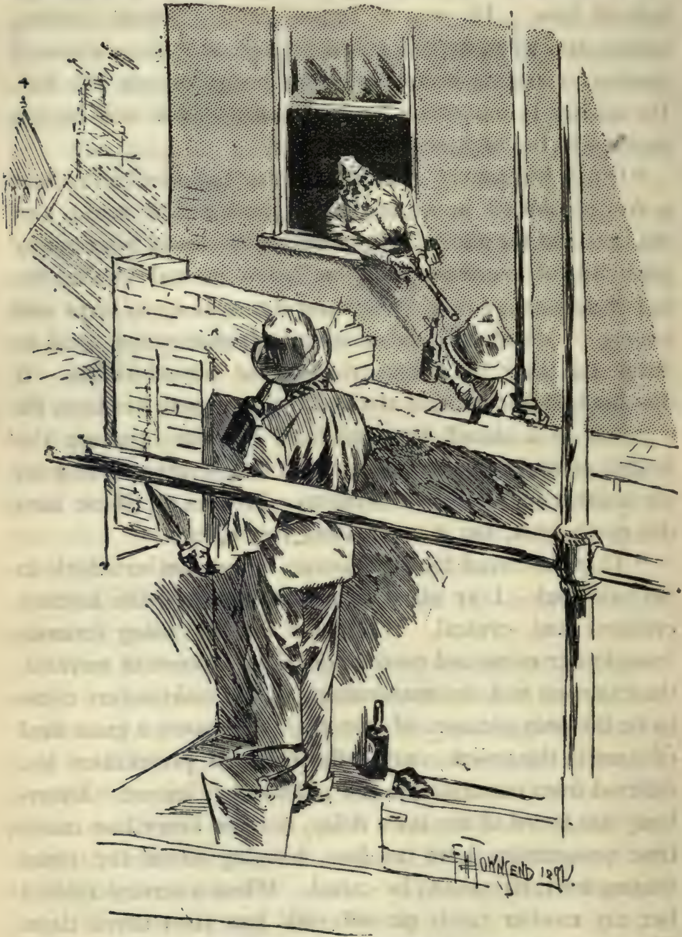
"By and by they began to renovate the exterior of the adjoining mansion.

"They put up a scaffolding, which grew higher and higher as the work advanced, and men swarmed upon it. At first my mother contemplated them with equanimity, because they were British working men and we were nearest heaven. But, as the months went by, they began to get nearer and nearer. There came a time when Selina's smile was distinctly visible to the man engaged on the section of the scaffolding immediately below. That smile encouraged him. It seemed to say 'Excelsior.'

"He was a veritable Don Juan, that labourer. At every flat he flirted with the maid in possession. By counting the storeys in our mansion you could calculate the number of his amours. With every rise he left a love-passage behind him. He was a typical man — always looking higher, and when he had raised himself to a more elevated position, spurning yesterday's love from beneath his feet. He seemed to mount on broken hearts. And now he was aspiring to the highest of all—Selina.

"Oh, it was cruel! My mother had secluded Selina like a virgin princess in an enchanted inaccessible tower, and yet here was the prince calmly scaling the tower without any possibility of interference. Long before he had reached the top the consumption of Bass in our flat went up by leaps and bounds. Selina, my mother ultimately discovered, used to lower the beer by strings tied to the broom-handle. It appeared, moreover, that she had two strings to her bow, for a swain in a slouch hat had been likewise climbing the height, at an insidious angle, which had screened him from my mother's observation hitherto. Neither of these men did much work, but it made them very thirsty.

"That destroyed the last vestige of my mother's faith in Selina's soul. Like all disappointed women, she became crabbed and cynical. When my father's rising fortunes brought her more and more under the dominion of servants, the exposure and out-manœuvring of her taskmasters came to be the only pleasure of her life. She spent a great deal of time in the police courts—the constant prosecution she suffered from curtailed the last relics of her leisure. Everybody has heard of the law's delay, but few know how much time prosecutors have to lose, hanging about the court waiting for their case to be called. When a servant robbed her, my mother rarely got off with less than seven days. The moment she had engaged a servant she became morbidly suspicious of him or her. Often, when she had dressed for dinner, it would suddenly strike her that if she ransacked a certain cupboard something or other would be discovered, and off she would go to spoil her spotless silks.


F. H. TOWNSEND 1892.

LOWERING THE BEER.

She had a mania for 'Spring cleanings' once a month, so as to keep the drones busy. Often I would bring a friend home, only to find the dining-room in the hall and the drawing-room on the landing. And yet to the end she retained a certain guileless, girlish simplicity—a fresh fund of hope which was not without a charm and pathos of its own. To the very last she believed that faultless, flawless servants existed somewhere, and she didn't intend to be happy till she got them ; so that it was said of her, by my sister's intended, that she passed her life on the door-step, either receiving an angel or expelling a fiend.

"It showed what a fine trustful nature had been turned to gall. She is at rest now, poor mother, her life's long slavery ended by the soft touch of all-merciful death ! Let us hope that she has opened her sorrow-stricken eyes on a brighter land, where earthly distinctions are annulled, and the poor heavy-laden mistress may mix on equal terms with the radiant parlour-maid and the buxom cook."

The tears were in Lillie's eyes as Miss Eustasia Pallas concluded her affecting recital.

"But don't you think," said the President, conquering her emotion, "that with such an awful example in your memory you could never yourself sink into such a serfage, even if you married ?"

"I dare not trust myself," said Eustasia. "I have seen the fall of too many other women. Why should I expect immunity from the general fate ? I think myself strong—but who can fathom her own weakness ? Why, I *have* actually been talking servants to you all the time. Think how continuous is the temptation, how subtle. Were it not better to possess my soul in peace, and to cultivate it nobly and wisely, and become a shining light of the higher spinsterhood ?"

Eustasia passed the preliminary examination and also the *vivâ voce*, and Lillie was again in high feather. But before the election was formally confirmed, she was chagrined to receive the following letter:—

"MY DEAR MISS DULCIMER,—I have good news for you. Knowing your anxiety to find for me a way out of my matrimonial dilemma, I am pleased to be able to inform you that it has been found by my friend and literary adviser, Percy Swinshel Spatt, the well-known philosopher and idealist. I met him writing down his thoughts in Bond Street. In the course of a dialogue upon the Beautiful, I put my puzzle to him, and he solved it in a moment. 'Why *must* you keep a servant?' he asked, for it is his habit to question every statement he does not make. 'Why not rather keep a mistress? Become a servant yourself, and all your difficulties vanish.' It was like a flash of lightning. 'Yes,' I said, when I had recovered from the dazzle, 'but that would mean separation from my husband.' 'Why?' he replied, with his usual habit. 'In many houses they prefer to take married couples.' 'Ah, but where should I find a man of like mind, a man to whom leisure for the cultivation of his soul was the one great necessity of life?' 'It is a curious coincidence, Eustasia,' he replied, 'that I was just myself contemplating keeping a master and retiring into a hermitage below stairs, to devote myself to philosophical contemplation. As a butler or a footman in a really aristocratic establishment, my duties would be nominal, and the other servants and my employers would attend to all my wants. Abstract speculation would naturally endue me with that grave silence and dignity which seem to be the chief duties of these superior creatures. It is possible, Eustasia, that I am not the first to perceive the advantages of this way of living, and that plush is but the disguise of the philosopher. As for you, Eustasia, you could become a parlour-maid. Thus should we live together peacefully, with no sordid housekeeping cares, no squalid interest in rates or taxes, devoted heart and soul to the higher life.' 'You light up for me perspectives of Paradise,' I cried enthusiastically. 'Then let us get the key of the garden at once,' he replied rapturously. And, turning over a new leaf of his philosophical note-book, he set to work there and then to draw up the advertisement: 'Wanted—by a young married couple, etc.' Of course we had to be a little previous, because I could not consent to

DREW UP THE ADVERTISEMENT.

marry him unless we had a situation to go to. We were only putting what the Greek grammars call a proleptic construction upon the situation. Well, it seems good servants are so scarce, we got a place at once,—the exact thing we were looking for. We are concealing our real names (lest the profession be overrun by jealous friends from Newnham and Girton and Oxford and Cambridge), so that I was able to give Percy a character, and Percy to give me a character. We are going into our place next Monday afternoon, so, to avoid obtaining the situation by false pretences, we shall have to go before the registrar on the Monday morning. Our honeymoon will be spent in the delightful and unexploited retreat of the servants' hall. —Yours, in the higher sisterhood,

EUSTASIA PALLAS."

CHAPTER X

THE GOOD YOUNG MEN WHO LIVED

"IT is, indeed, a happy solution," said Lord Silverdale enviously. "To spend your life in the service of other men, yet to save it for yourself—it reconciles all ideals."

"Well, you can very easily try it," said Lillie. "I have just heard from the Princess of Portman Square—she is reorganising her household in view of her nuptials. Shall I write you a recommendation?"

"No; but I will read you an Address to an Egyptian Tipcat," replied his lordship, with the irrelevancy which was growing upon him. "You know the recent excavations have shown that the little Egyptians used to play 'pussy-cat' five thousand years ago."

ADDRESS TO AN EGYPTIAN TIPCAT

And thou hast flown about—how strange a story!—
Full five-and-forty centuries ago,
Ere Fayoum, fired with military glory,
Received from Gürod, with purpureal show,
The sea-born captives of the spear and bow;
And thou hast blacked, perhaps, the very finest eye
That sparkled in the twelfth Egyptian Dynasty.

The sight of thee brings visions panoramic
Of manlier games—as Faro, Pyramids;
What hands, now tinct with substances balsamic,
Have set thee leaping like the sportive kids,
What time the passers-by did close their lids?
Did the stern priesthood strive thy cult to smother,
Or wast thou worshipped like thy purring brother?

Where is the youth by whom thou wast created
And tipped profusely? Doth he frisk in glee
In Aahlu, or lives he, transmigrated,
The lower life Osiris did decree,
Of fowl, or fly, or fish, or fox, or flea?
Or, fallen deeper, is he politician,
Stumping the land, his country's quack physician?

Thou sphinx in wood, unchanged, serene, immortal,
How many states and temples have decayed,
And generations passed the mystic portal,
Whilst thou, still young, hast gone on being played?
Say when thy popularity shall fade?
And art thou—here's my last, if not my stiffest—
As good a bouncer as the hieroglyphist?

"Why, did the hieroglyphists use to brag?" asked Lillie.

"Shamefully. You can no more believe in their statements than in epitaphs. There seems something peculiarly mendacious about stone as a recording medium. Only it must be admitted on behalf of the hieroglyphists, that it may be the Egyptologists who are the braggers. There never was an ancient inscription which is not capable of being taken in a dozen different ways, like a party-leader's speech. Every word has six possible meanings and half-a-dozen probable ones. The savants do but pretend to understand the stones."

So saying, Lord Silverdale took his departure. On the door-step he met a young lady carrying a brown-paper parcel. She smiled so sweetly at him that he raised his hat and wondered where he had met her.

But it was only another candidate. She faced Turple the Magnificent, and smiled on unawed. Turple ended by relaxing his muscles a whit, then, ashamed of himself, he announced gruffly, "Miss Mary Friscoe."

After the preliminary formalities, and after having duly assured herself that there was no male ear within earshot, Miss Friscoe delivered herself of the following candid confession:

"I am a pretty girl, as you can see. I wear sweet frocks and smiles, and my eyes are of Heaven's own blue. Men are fond of gazing into them. Men are so artistic. They admire the Beautiful, and tell her so. Women are so different. I have overheard my girl-friends call me 'that silly little flirt.'

"I hold that any woman can twist any man round her little finger or his arm round her waist, therefore I consider it no conceit to say I have attracted considerable attentions. If I had accepted all the offers I received, my marriages could easily have filled a column of *The Times*.

"I know there are women who think that men are coarse unsentimental creatures, given over to slang, tobacco, billiards, betting, brandies and sodas, smoking-room stories, flirtations with bar-maids, dress, and general depravity.

"But the women who say or write that are soured creatures, who have never been loved, have never fathomed the depth and purity of men's souls.

"I have been loved. I have been loved much and often, and I speak as one who knows. Man is the most maligned animal in creation. He is the least gross and carnal of creatures, the most exquisitely pure and refined in thought and deed, the most capable of disinterested devotion, self-sacrifice, chivalry, tenderness. Every man is his own Bayard.

"If men had their deserts, we women—heartless, frivolous, venal creatures that we are—would go down on our knees to them, and beg them to marry us. I am a woman, and again I speak as one who knows. For I am not a bad specimen of my sex. Even my best friends admit I am only silly. I am really a very generous and kind-hearted little thing. I never keep my tailor waiting longer than a year. I have made quite a number of penwipers for the poor, and I have never told an unnecessary lie in my life. I give a great deal of affection to my mother, and even a little assistance in the household. I do not smoke scented cigarettes. I read travels and biographies as well as novels, play the guitar rather well, attend an art-class, rise long before noon, am good-tempered, wear my ball dresses more than once, turn winter dresses into spring frocks by stripping off the fur and putting on galloon, and diversify my gowns by changing the sleeves. In short, I am a superior, thoroughly domesticated girl.

"And yet I have never met a man who has not had the advantage of me in all the virtues. There was George Holly,—I regret I cannot mention my lovers in chronological order, but my memories are so vague they all seem to fuse into one another. Perhaps it is because there is a lack of distinctiveness about men—a monotonous goodness which has its charm but is extremely confusing. One thing I do remember, though, about George—at least, I think it was George. His moustache was rather bristly, and the little curled tips used to tickle one's nose comically. I was very disappointed in George. I had heard such a lot of talk about him, but when I got to really know him I found he was not a bit like it. How I came to really know him was like this.

"'Mary,' he said, as we sat on the stairs, high up so as not to be in the way of the waiters, 'Won't you say Yes, and make me the happiest man alive? Never man loved as I love now! Answer me. Do not torture me with suspense.'

"I was silent—speechless with happiness. To think that I had won this true manly heart! I looked down at my fan. My lips were forming the affirmative monosyllable, when George continued passionately:

"'O Mary, speak!—Mary, the only woman I ever loved!'

"I turned pale with emotion. Tears came into my eyes.

"'Is this true?' I articulated. 'Am I really the only woman you ever loved?'

"'By my hopes of a hereafter—Yes.' George was a bit slangy in his general conversation, the shallow world never knew the poetry he could rise to. 'This is the first time I have known what it is to love, Mary—my sweet, my own.'

"'No, not your own,' I interrupted coldly, for my heart was like ice within me. 'I belong to myself, and I intend to. Will you give me your arm into the ball-room—Mr. Daythorpe must be looking for me everywhere.'

"It sounds very wicked to say it, I know, but I cannot delay my confession longer. I love, I adore, I dote on wicked men,—men who love not wisely but too well. When I learnt history at school I could always answer questions about the reign of Charles II., it was such a deliciously wicked period. I love Burns, Lord Byron, De Musset, Heine,—all the nice naughty men of history or fiction. I like Ouida's guardsmen whose love is a tornado, and Charlotte Brontë's Rochester, and Richardson's Lovelace.

"I hate, I detest milksops. And a good man always seems to me a milksop. It is a flaw—a terrible flaw in my composition, I know—but I cannot help it. It makes me miserable, but what can I do? Nature will out.

"That was how I came to find George out, and to discover he was not the terrible cavalier, the abandoned squire of dames the world said he was. His reputation was purely bogus. The gossips might buzz, but I had it on the highest authority I was the first woman he had ever loved. What pleasure is there in such a conquest? It grieved me to break his heart, but I had no option.

"Daythorpe was another fellow who taught me the same lesson of the purity and high emotions of his cruelly libelled sex. He, too, when driven into a corner (far from the madding crowd), confessed that I was the only woman he had ever loved. I have tried them all — poets and musicians, barristers and business men. They all had suffered from the same incapacity for affection till they met me. It was quite pathetic to discover how truly all men were brothers. The only difference was, that while some added I was the only woman they ever could love, others insisted that never man had loved before as they did now. The latter lovers always reminded me of advertisers offering a superior article to anything in the trade. Nowhere could

I meet the man I longed for—the man who had lived and loved. Once I felt stirrings towards a handsome young widower, but he went out of his way to assure me he had never cared for his first wife; after that, of course, he had no chance. Unable to discover any but good young men, I resigned myself perforce to spinsterhood. I resolved to cultivate only Platonic relations. I told young men to come to me and tell me their troubles. I encouraged them to sit at my feet and confide in me, while I held their hands to give them courage. But even so they would never confess to anything worth hearing, and if they did love anybody it invariably turned out to be me, and me only. Yes, I grieve to say these Platonic young men were just as good as the others; leaving out the audacity of their proposing to me when I had given them no encouragement. Here again I found men distressingly alike. They are constitutionally unable to be girls' chums; they are always hankering to convert the friendship into love. Time after time my anticipations of a genuine comradeship were rudely dispelled by fatuous philandering. Yet I never ceased to be surprised, and I never lost hope. Such, I suppose, is the simple trustfulness of a girl's nature.

"In time I got to know when the explosion was coming, and this deadened the shock. I found it was usually preceded by suicidal remarks of a retrospective character. My comrades would tell me of their past lives, of the days when the world's oyster was yet unopened by them. In those dark days (tears of self-pity came into their eyes as they spoke of them) they were on the point of suicide—to a man. Only, one little thing always came to save them—their first brief; the acceptance of their first article, poem or song; the opportune deaths of aunts; the chance hearing

PLATONIC LOVE.

of an organ note rolling through the portal of a village church on a Sunday afternoon; a letter from an old schoolmaster. The obvious survival of the narrators rather spoiled the sensational thrill for me, but they themselves were always keenly touched by the story. And from suicide in the past to suicide in the future was an easy transition. Alas! I was the connecting link. They loved me—and unless I returned their love, that early suicide would prove to have been merely postponed. In the course of conversation it transpired that I was the first woman they had ever loved. I remember once rejecting on this account two such Platonic failures, within ten minutes of each other. One was a well-known caricaturist, and the other was the editor of a ladies' paper. Each left me declaring his heart was broken, that I had led him on shamelessly, that I was a heartless jilt, and that he would go and kill himself. My brother Tom accidentally told me he saw them together about an hour afterwards at a bar in the Strand, asking each other what was their poison. So I learnt that they had spoken the truth. I had driven them to drink. And, according to Tom, the drink at this particular bar is superior to strychnine. He says men always take it in preference."

DRIVEN TO DRINK.

"And have you then finally decided to abandon Platonics?" asked Lillie, when the flow of words came to an end.

"Finally."

"And you have decided to enrol in our ranks?"

Miss Mary Friscoe hesitated.

"Well—about that part I'm not quite so certain. To tell the truth, there is one young man of my acquaintance who has never yet proposed. When I started for here in disgust at the goodness of mankind, I forgot him, but in talking he has come back to my mind. I have a strong suspicion he is quite wicked. He is always painting actresses. Don't you think it would be unfair to him to take my vows without giving him a chance?"

"Well, yes," said Lillie musingly; "perhaps it would. You would feel easier afterwards; otherwise you might always reproach yourself with the thought that you had perhaps turned away from a bad man's love. You might feel that the world was not so good as you had imagined in your girlish cynicism, and then you might regret having joined us."

"Quite so," said Miss Friscoe eagerly. "But he shall be the very last man I will listen to."

"When do you propose to be proposed to by him?"

"The sooner the better. This very day, if you like. I am going straight from here to my art-class."

"Very well. Then you will come to-morrow and tell me your final decision?"

"To-morrow."

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Miss Mary Friscoe arrived at the art-class late. Her fellow-students of both sexes were already at their easels, and her entry distracted everybody. It was a motley gathering, working in motley media—charcoal, chalk, pencil, oil, water-colour. One girl was modelling in clay; and one young gentleman, opera-glass in hand, was making enlarged coloured copies of photographs. It was this young gentleman that Mary came out for to see. His name was Bertie Smythe. He was rich, but he would always be a poor artist. His ambition was to paint the nude.

There were lilies of the valley in the bosom of Mary's art-gown, and when she arrived she unfolded the brown-paper parcel she carried, and took therefrom a cardboard box containing a snow-white collar and spotless cuffs, which she proceeded to adjust upon her person. She then went to the drawing-board rack and stood helpless, unable to reach down her board, which was quite two inches above her head. There was a rush of embryo R.A.'s. Those who failed to hand her the board got down the cast and dusted it for her, and fixed it up according to her minute and detailed directions, and adjusted her easel and brought her a trestle, and lent her lead pencils and cut them for her, and gave her chunks of stale bread; for all which services she rewarded them with bewitching smiles and profuse thanks, and a thousand apologies. It took her a long time getting to work on the charcoal cluster of plums, which had occupied her ever since the commencement of the term, because she never ventured to begin without holding long confabulations with her fellow-students as to whether the light was falling in exactly the same way as last time. She got them to cock their heads on one side and survey the sketch, to retreat and look at it knowingly, to measure the visual angle with a stick of charcoal, or even to manipulate delicately the great work itself. Meantime she fluttered about it—chattering, alternately enraptured and dissatisfied, and when at last she started it was by rubbing everything out.

The best position for drawing happened to be next to Bertie Smythe. That artist was now engaged in copying the portrait of an actress.

"O Mr. Smythe," said Mary suddenly, in a confidential whisper, "I've got such a beautiful face for you to paint."

"I know you have!" flashed Bertie, in the same intimate tone.

"What a tease you are, twisting my words like that," said Mary, rapping him playfully on the knuckles with her maul-stick. "You know what I mean quite well; it's a cousin of mine in the country."

"I see—it runs in the family," said Bertie.

"What runs in the family?" asked Mary.

"Beautiful faces, of course."

"Oh, that's too bad of you," said Mary, pouting. "You know I don't like compliments." She rubbed a pellet of bread fretfully into her drawing.

"I don't pay compliments. I tell the truth," said Bertie, meeting her gaze unflinchingly.

"Oh, look at that funny little curl Miss Roberts is wearing to-night!"

"Bother Miss Roberts! When are you going to let me have *your* face to paint?"

"My cousin's, you mean," said Mary, rubbing away harder than ever.

"No, I don't, I mean yours."

"I never give away photographs to gentlemen."

"Well, sit to me, then."

"Sit to you! Where?"

"In my studio."

"Good gracious! What are you talking about?"

"You."

"Oh, you are too tiresome. I shall never get this finished," grumbled Mary, concentrating herself so vigorously on the drawing that she absent-mindedly erased the last vestiges of it. She took up her plumb-line and held it in front of her cast, and became absorbed in contemplating it.

"You haven't answered my question, Miss Friscoe," whispered Bertie pertinaciously.

"What question?"

"When are you going to lend me your face?"

"Why, there's Mr. Biskett going home already."

"Hang Mr. Biskett! I say, Mary ——" he began passionately.

"How are you getting on, Mr. Smythe?" came the creaking voice of Potts, the drawing-master, behind him.

"Pretty well, thank you; how's yourself?" mechanically replied Bertie, greatly flustered by his inopportune arrival.

Potts stared, and Mary burst into a ringing laugh.

"Look at my drawing, Mr. Potts," she said. "It *will* come so funny."

"Why, there's nothing there," said Potts.

"Dear me, no more there is," said Mary. "I was entirely dissatisfied with it. You might just sketch it in for me."

Potts was accustomed to doing the work of most of the lady students. They used to let him do a little bit on each of his rounds till the thing was completed. He set to work on Mary's drawing, leaving her to finish being proposed to.

"And you really love me?" Mary was saying, while Potts was sketching the second plum.

"Can you doubt it?" Bertie whispered tremulously.

"Yes, I do doubt it. You have loved so many girls, you know. Oh, I have heard all about your conquests."

She thought it best to take the bull by the horns, and her breath came thick and fast as she waited for the reply that would make or mar her life.

Bertie's face lit up with pleasure.

"Oh, but——" he began.

"Ah yes, I know," she interrupted triumphantly. "What about that actress you are painting now?"

"Oh, well," said Bertie. "If you say 'Yes,' I promise never to speak to her again."

"And you will give up your bad habits?" she continued joyfully.

"Every one. Even my cigarettes—if you say the word. My whole life shall be devoted to making you happy. You shall never hear a cross word from my lips."

Mary's face fell, her lips twitched. What was the use of marrying a milksop like that? Where would be the fun of a union without mutual recriminations and sweet reconciliations? She even began to doubt whether he was wicked after all.

"Did you ever really love that actress?" she whispered anxiously.

"No, of course I didn't," said Bertie soothingly. "To tell the truth, I have never spoken to her in my life. I bought her photo in Burlington Arcade, and I only talk with the fellows about ballet-girls in order not to be behind the times. I never knew what love was till I met you. You are the only——"

Crash! bang! went his three-legged easel, upset by Mary's irrepressible movement of pique. The eyes of the class were on them in a moment, but only Mary knew that in that crash her last hope of happiness had fallen oo.

. . . .

"I do trust Miss Friscoe's last chance will not prove a blank again," said Lord Silverdale, when Lillie had told him of the poor girl's prior disappointments.

"Why?" asked the President.

"Because I shrink from the *vivâ voce* examination."

"Why?" asked the President.

"I am afraid I should be so dangerous."

"Why?" asked the President.

"Because I *have* loved before. I shall be desperately in love with another woman all through the interview."

"Oh, I am so sorry; but you are inadmissible," said Lillie, when Miss Friscoe came to announce her willingness to join the Club.

"Why?" asked the candidate.

"Because you belong to an art-class. It is forbidden by our by-laws. How stupid of me not to think of it yesterday!"

"But I am ready to give it up."

"Oh, I couldn't dream of allowing that on any account," said the President. "I hear you draw so well."

So Mary never went before the Honorary Trier.

CHAPTER XI

ADVENTURES IN SEARCH OF THE POLE

"OH, by the way, that Miss Friscoe will not trouble you, you will be glad to hear," said Lillie lightly.

"Indeed?" said Silverdale. "Then she *has* drawn a prize after all! I cannot say as much for the young man. I hardly think she is a credit to your sex. Somehow she reminded me of a woman I used to know, and of some verses I wrote upon her,"

["If he had given me a chance, and not gone on to read his poetry so quickly," wrote Lillie in her diary that night, "I might have told him that his inference about Miss Friscoe was incorrect. But it is such a trifle—it is not worth telling him now—especially as he practically intimated she would have been an undesirable member, and I only saved him the trouble of trying her."]

Lord Silverdale read his verses without the accompaniment of the banjo, an instrument too frivolous for the tragic muse.

LA FEMME QUI NE RIT PAS

It was fair with a loveliness mystic,
  Like the faces that Raphaël drew,
Enigmatic, intense, cabalistic,
  But surcharged with the light of the true;
Such a face, such a hauntingly magic
  Incarnation of wistful regret,
It was tenebrous, tender, and tragic,—
    I dream of it yet.

And there lives in my charm'd recollection
  The sweet mouth with its lip cruelly curled,
As with bitter ironic rejection
  Of the gods of the frivolous world.
Yet not ever disdain on her features
  Was enthroned, for a heavenly peace
Often linked her with bright seraph creatures
    Or statues of Greece.

I met her at dinners and dances,
  Or on yachts that by moonlight went trips,
And was thrilled by her marvellous glances,
  And the sneer or repose of her lips.
Never smile o'er her features did play light,
  Never laughter illumined her eyes;
She grew to seem sundered from daylight
    And sun-kindled skies,

Were they human at all, those dusk glories
Of eyes? And their owner, was she
A Swinburnian Lady Dolores,
Or a sprite from some shadowy sea?
A Cassandra at sea-trip and *soirée*,
Or Proserpina visiting earth?
Ay, what Harpy pursued her as quarry
To strangle so mirth?

Ah, but now I am wiser and sadder,
And my spirit can never again
At the sight of your fairness feel gladder,
O ladies, who coolly obtain
An enamelled and painted complexion
On conditions (which really are "style")—
You must never by day risk detection,
And never more smile.

"I don't see where the connection with Miss Friscoe comes in," said Lillie.

"No? Why, simply if she acquired an enamelled complexion, it might be the salvation of her, don't you see? Like Henry I., she would never smile again."

Lillie smiled. Then producing a manuscript, she said:

"I think you will be interested in this story of another of the candidates who applied during your expedition to the clouds. It is quite unique, and for amusement I have written it from the man's point of view."

"May I come in?" interrupted the millionaire, popping his head through the door. "Are there any Old Maids here?"

"Only me," said Lillie, "or rather, only I."

"Oh, then, I'll call another time."

"No, you may come in, father. Lord Silverdale and I have finished our business for the day. You can take that away with you and read it at your leisure, Lord Silverdale."

The millionaire came in, but without *empressement*, That night Lord Silverdale, who was suffering from insomnia, took the manuscript to bed with him, but he could not sleep till he had finished it.

. . . .

"I, Anton Mendoza, bachelor, born thirty years ago by the grace of the Holy Virgin on the fête-day of San Anton, patron of pigs and old maids, after sundry adventures by sea and land, found myself in the autumn of last year in the pestiferous atmosphere of London. I had picked up bad English and a good sum of money in South America, and by the aid of the two was enabled to thread my way through the mazes of the metropolis. I soon tired of the neighbourhood of the Alhambra (in the proximity of which I had with mistaken patriotism established myself), for the wealthy quarters of all great cities have more affinities than differences, and after a few days of sight-seeing I resolved to fare forth in quest of the real sights of London. Mounting the box of the first omnibus that came along, I threw the reins of my fortunes into the hands of the driver, and drew a little blue ticket from the lottery of fate. I scanned the slip of paper curiously, and learned therefrom that I was going fast to 'The Angel,' which I shrewdly divined to be a public-house, knowing that these islanders display no poetry and imagination save in connection with beer. My intuition was correct, and though it was the forenoon I alighted amid a double stream of pedestrians, the one branch flowing into 'The Angel,' and the other issuing therefrom. Extricating myself, I looked at my compass, and, following the direction of the needle, soon found myself in a network of unlovely streets. For an hour I paced forwards without chancing on aught of interest, save many weary organ-grinders, seemingly serenading their mistresses with upward glances at their chamber-windows, and I was commencing to fear that my blue ticket would prove a blank, when a savoury odour of garlic struck on my nostrils and apprised me that my walk had given me an appetite. Glancing sideways I saw a door swinging, the same bearing in painted letters on the glass the words: 'Menotti's Restaurant—*Ici on parle Français.*' It looked a queer little place, and the little back street into which I had strayed seemed hardly auspicious of cleanly fare. Still the jewel of good cookery harbours often in the plainest caskets, and I set the door swinging again and passed into a narrow room, walled with cracked mirrors and furnished with a few little tables, a rusty waiter, and a proprietorial-looking person perpetually bent over a speaking-tube. As noon was barely arrived, I was not surprised to find the place all but empty. At the extreme end of the restaurant I caught a glimpse of a stout dark man with iron-grey whiskers. I thought I would go and lunch at the table of the solitary customer and scrape acquaintance, and thus perhaps achieve an adventure. But hardly had I seated myself opposite him than a shock traversed his face, the morsel he had just swallowed seemed to stick in his throat, he rose coughing violently and clapping his palm over his mouth with the fingers spread out almost as if he wished to hide his face, turned his back quickly, seized his hat, threw half-a-crown to the waiter, and scuttled from the establishment.

"I was considerably surprised at his abrupt departure, as if I had brought some infection with me. The momentary glimpse I had caught of his face had convinced me I had never seen it before, that it had no place in the photograph album of my brain, though now it would be fixed there for ever. The nose hooked itself on to my memory at once. It must be that he had mistaken me for somebody else, somebody whom he had reason to fear. Perhaps he was a criminal

HE SCUTTLED FROM THE ESTABLISHMENT.

and imagined me a detective. I called the proprietor, and inquired of him in French who the man was and what was the matter with him. But he shook his head and answered, 'That man there puzzles me. There is a mystery behind.'

"'Why, has he done anything strange before to-day?'

"'No, not precisely.'

"'How then?'

"'I will tell you. He comes here once a year.'

"'Once a year!' I repeated.

"'No more. This has been going on for twelve years.'

"'What are you telling me there?' I murmured.

"'It is true.'

"'But how have you remembered him from year to year?'

"'I was struck by his face and his air the very first time. He seemed anxious, ill at ease, worried. He left his chop half eaten.'

"'Ha!' I murmured.

"'Also, he looks different from most of my clients. They are not of that type. Of course I forget him immediately—it is not my affair. But when he comes the second time I recall him on the instant, though a year has passed. Again he looks perturbed, restless. I say to myself, "Aha, thou art not a happy man, there is something which preys on thy mind. However, thy money is good, and to the devil with the rest." So it goes on. After three or four visits I commence to look out for him, and I discover that it is only once a year he does me the honour to arrive. There are twelve years that I know him—I have seen him twelve times.'

"'And he has always this nervous air?'

"'Not always. That varies. Sometimes he appears calm, sometimes even happy.'

"'Perhaps it is your fare?' I said slyly.

"'Ah no, Monsieur, that does not vary. It is always of the first excellence.'

"'Does he always come on the same date?'

"'No, Monsieur. There is the puzzle. It is never exactly a year between his visits — sometimes it is more, sometimes it is less.'

"'There is, indeed, the puzzle,' I agreed. 'If it were always the same date, it would be a clue. Ah, an idea! He comes not always on the same date of the month, but he comes, perhaps, on the same day of the week, eh?'

"Again the proprietor dashed me back into the depths of perplexity.

"'No,' he said decisively. 'Monday, Wednesday, Saturday—it is all the same. The only thing that changes not is the man and his dress. Always the same broadcloth frock-coat and the same high hat, and the same seals at the heavy watch-chain. He is a rich man—that sees itself.'

"I wrinkled my brow and tugged the ends of my moustache in the effort to find a solution. The proprietor tugged the ends of his own moustache in sympathetic silence.

"'Does he always slink out if anybody sits down opposite to him?' I inquired again.

"'On the contrary. He talks and chats quite freely with his neighbours when there are any. I have seen his countenance light up when a man has come to seat himself next to him.'

"'Then to-day is the first time he has behaved so strangely?'

"'Absolutely.'

"Again I was silent. I looked at myself curiously in the cracked mirrors.

"'Do you see anything strange in my appearance?' I asked the proprietor.

"'Nothing in the world,' said the proprietor, shaking his head vigorously.

"'Nothing in the world,' echoed the waiter emphatically.

"'Then why does he object to me, when he doesn't object to anybody else?'

"'Pardon,' said the proprietor. 'It is, after all, but rarely that a stranger sits at his table. He comes ordinarily so early for his lunch that my clients have not yet arrived, and I have only the honour to serve an accidental customer like yourself.'

"'Ah, then, there is some regularity about the time of day at least?'

"'Ah yes, there is that,' said the proprietor reflectively. 'But even here there is no hard and fast line. He may be an hour earlier, he may be an hour later.'

"'What a droll of a man!' I said, laughing, even as I wondered. 'And you have not been able to discover anything about him, though he has given it you in twelve?'

"'It is not my affair,' he repeated, shrugging his shoulders.

"'You know not his name even?'

"'How should I know it?'

"'Ah, very well, you shall see!' I said, buttoning up my coat resolutely and rising to my feet. 'You shall see that I will find out everything at once. I, a stranger in London, who love the oceans and the forests better than the cities; I, who know only the secrets of Nature,—behold I will solve you this mystery of humanity.'

"'As Monsieur pleases,' replied the proprietor. 'For me the only question is what Monsieur will have for his lunch.'

"'I want no lunch,' I cried. Then, seeing his downcast face, and remembering the man must be out of sight by this time, and nothing was to be gained by haste, I ordered some broth and some chicken and ham, and strode to the door to make sure there was no immediate chance of coming upon him. The little by-street was almost deserted, there was not a sign of my man. I returned to my seat and devoted myself to my inner man instead. Then I rebuttoned my coat afresh—though with less facility—and sauntered out joyously. Now at last I had found something to interest me in London. The confidence born of a good meal was strong in my bosom as I pushed those swinging doors open, and cried '*Au revoir*' to my host, for I designed to return and to dazzle him with my exploits.

"'*Au revoir*, Monsieur, a thousand thanks,' cried the proprietor, popping up from his speaking-tube. 'But where are you going? Where do you hope to find this man?'

"'I go not to find the man,' I replied airily.

"'*Comment!*' he exclaimed in his astonishment.

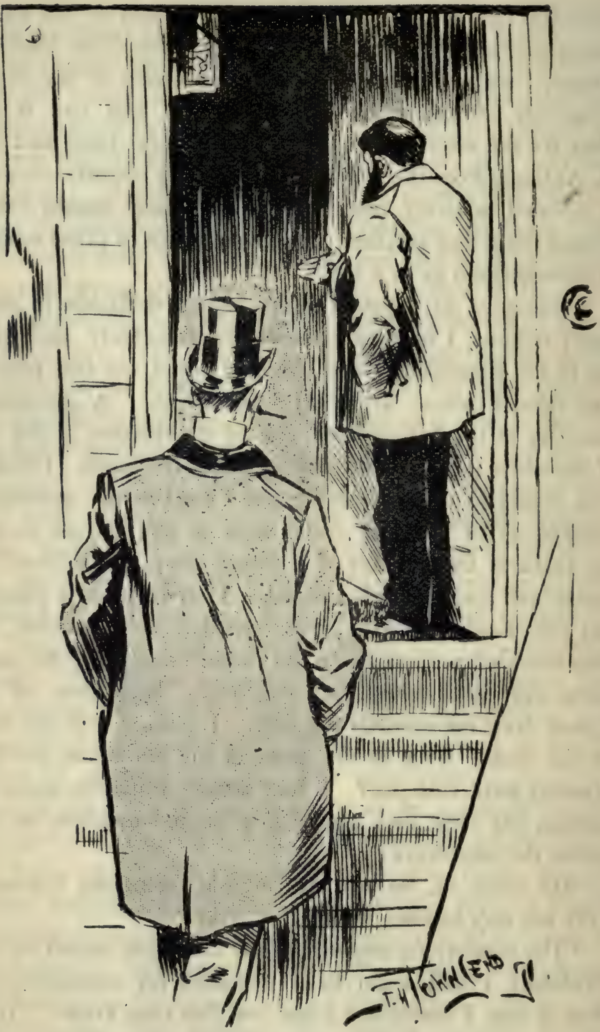
"'I go to seek the woman," I said, in imposing accents. And, waving my hand amicably, I sallied forth into the dingy little street.

"But alas for human anticipations! The whole of that day I paced the dead and alive streets of North London without striking the faintest indication of a trail. After a week's futile wanderings, I began to realise the immensity of the English metropolis—immense not only by its actual area, but by the multiplicity of its streets and windings, and by the indifference of each household to its neighbours, which makes every roof the cover of manifold mysterious existences and potentialities. To look for a needle in a bundle of hay were child's play to the task of finding a face in a London suburb, even assuming, as I did, my enigma lived in the northern district. I dared not return to the restaurant to inquire if perchance he had been seen. I was ashamed to confess myself baffled. I shifted my quarters from Leicester Square to Green Lanes, and walked every day within a four mile radius of the restaurant, but Fortune turned her face (and his) from me, and I raged at my own folly in undertaking so hopeless a quest. At last 'Patience!' I cried. 'Patience, and shuffle the cards!' It was my pet proverb when off the track of anything. To cut yourself adrift from the old plan and look at the problem with new eyes—that was my recipe. I tried it by going into the country for some stag-hunting, which, I had ascertained from a farmer whom I met in a coffee-house, could be obtained in some of the villages in the next county. But English field-sports I found little to my taste, for the deer had been unhorned and was let out of a cart, and it was only playing at sport. The Holy Mother save me from such bloodless make-believe! Though the hunting season was in full swing, I returned in disgust to the town, and again confiding my fortunes to a common or garden omnibus, I surveyed the street panorama from my seat on the roof till the vehicle turned round for the backward journey. This time I found myself in Canonbury, a district within the radius I had previously explored. The coincidence gave me fresh hope — it seemed a happy augury of ultimate success. The saints would guide my footsteps after all; for he who wills aught intensely cajoles Providence. The dusk had fallen, and the night lamps had been lit in the heavens and on the earth, though without imparting cheerfulness to the rigid rows of highly respectable houses. I walked through street after street of grey barracks, tall narrow structures, holding themselves with military stiffness and ranged in serried columns, the very greenery that relieved their fronts growing sympathetically symmetrical and sombre. I sighed for my native orange-groves, I longed for a whiff of the blue Mediterranean, I strove to recall the breezy expanses of the South American pampas whence I had come, and had it not been for the interest of my search I should have fled like St. Anthony from the lady, though for very opposite reasons. It seemed scarcely possible that romance should brood behind those dull façades; the grosser spirit of prose seemed to shroud them as in a fog.

"Suddenly, as I paced with clogged footsteps in these heavy regions, I heard a voice calling somebody, and, looking in the direction of the sound, I could not but fancy it was myself whose attention was sought. A gentleman standing at the hall-door of one of the houses, at the top of the white steps, was beckoning in my direction. I halted, and, gazing on all sides, ascertained I was the sole pedestrian. Puzzled as to what he could want of me, I tried to scan his features by the rays of a street lamp which faced the house and under which I stood. They revealed a pleasant but not English-looking face, bearded and bronzed, but they revealed nothing as to the owner's designs. He stood there still beckoning, and the latent hypnotism of the appeal drew me towards the gate. I paused with my hand on the lock. What in the name of all the saints could he possibly want with me? I had sundry valuables about my person, but then they included a loaded revolver, so why refuse the adventure?

'Do come in,' he said in English, seeing my hesitation. '*We are only waiting for you.*'

"The mysterious language of the invitation sealed my fate. Evidently I had again been mistaken for somebody else. Was it that I resembled some one this man knew? If so, it would probably be the same some one the other man had



I ACCEPTED THE STRANGE INVITATION.

dreaded. I seemed to feel the end of a clue at last, the other end of which was tied to him I sought. Putting my hand to my breast-pocket, to make sure it held my pistol, I drew back the handle of the gate and ascended the steps. There was an expression of satisfaction on the face of my inviter, and, turning his back upon me, he threw the door wide open, and held it courteously as I entered. A whiff of warm stuffy air smote my nostrils as I stepped into the hall, where an indiarubber plant stood upon a rack heavily laden with overcoats. My host preceded me a few paces and opened a door on the right. A confused babble of guttural speech broke upon my ear, and over his shoulder I caught a glimpse of a strange scene—a medley of swarthy men, wearing their hats, a venerable-looking old man who seemed their chief being prominent in a grim black skull-cap; there was a strange weird wick burning in a cup of oil on the mantelpiece, and on a sofa at the extreme end of the room sat a beautiful young lady, weeping silently.

"My heart gave a great leap. Instinct told me I had found the woman.

"I made the sign of the cross and entered.

"A strange look of relief passed over the faces of the company as I came in. Instinctively I removed my hat, but he who had summoned me deprecated the courtesy with a gesture, remarking, 'We are commencing at once.'

"I stared at him, more puzzled than ever, but kept silence, lest speech should betray me and snatch the solution from me on the very eve of my arrival at it. It was gathering in my mind that I must strikingly resemble one of the band, that the man of the restaurant had betrayed us, and that he went in fear of our vengeance. Only thus could I account for my reception, both by him and by the rest of the gang.

"The patriarchal-looking chieftain got up and turned his back to the company, as if surveying them through the mantel mirror. He then addressed them at great length with averted face in a strange language, the others following him attentively, and accompanying his remarks with an undercurrent of murmured sympathy, occasionally breaking out into loud exclamations of assent in the same tongue. I listened with all my ears, but could not form the least idea as to what the language was. There were gutturals in it as in German, but I can always detect German, if I cannot understand it. There was never a word which had the faintest analogy with any of the European tongues. I came to the conclusion it was a patter of their own. The leader spoke hurriedly for the most part, but in his slower passages there was a rise and fall of the voice almost amounting to a musical inflection. Near the end, after an emphatic speech, frequently interrupted by applause, he dropped his voice to a whisper, and a hushed silence fell upon the room. The beautiful girl on the couch got up, and, holding a richly-bound book in her hand, perused it quietly. Her lovely eyes were heavy with tears. I drifted upon a current of wonder into perusing her face, and it was with a start that, at the sudden resumption of the leader's speech, I awoke from my dreams. The address came to a final close soon after, and then another member wound up the proceedings with a little speech which was received with great enthusiasm.

"While he was speaking, I studied the back of the patriarch's head. He moved it, and my eyes accidentally lighted on something on the mantelpiece which sent a thrill through my whole being. It was a photograph, and, unless some hallucination tricked my vision, the photograph of the man I sought. I trembled with excitement. My instinct had been correct. I had found the woman. Saint Anthony had guided my footsteps aright. The company was slowly dispersing, chatting as it went. Everybody took leave of the beautiful girl, who had by this time dried her eyes and resumed the queen. I should have to go with them, and without an inkling of comprehension of what had passed! What had they been plotting? What part had I been playing in these uncanny transactions? What had they been doing to bring suffering to this fair girl, before whom all bowed in mock homage? Was she the unwilling accomplice of their discreditable designs? I could not see an inch in the bewildering fog. And was I to depart like the rest, doomed to cudgel my brains till they ached like caned schoolboys? No; my duty was clear. A gentle creature was in trouble—it was my business to stay and succour her.

"Then suddenly the thought flashed upon me that she loved the man who had betrayed us, that she had pleaded with tears for his life, and that her petition had been granted.

"The solution seemed almost complete, yet it found me no more willing to go. Had I not still to discover for what end we were leagued together?

"As I stood motionless, thus musing, the minutes and the company slipped away. I was left with the man of the door-step, the second speaker, and the beautiful girl.

"While I was wondering by what pretext to remain, the second speaker came up to me, and said cordially, "We are so much obliged to you for coming. It was very good of you."

"His English was that of a native, as I enviously noted. He was a young good-looking fellow, but, as I gazed at him, a vague resemblance to the stranger of the restaurant and to the photograph on the mantelpiece forced itself on my attention.

"'Oh, it was no trouble, no trouble at all,' I remarked cheerfully. 'I will come again if you like.'

"'Thank you; but this is our last night, with the exception of Saturday, when one can get together twenty quite easily, so there is no need to trouble you, as you perhaps do not reside in the neighbourhood.'

"'Oh, but I do,' I hastened to correct him.

"'In that case we shall be very pleased to see you,' he replied readily. 'I don't remember seeing you before in the district; I presume you are a newcomer?"

"'Yes, that's it,' I exclaimed glibly, secretly more puzzled than ever. He did not remember seeing me before, nor did the man of the door-step vouchsafe any information as to my identity. Then I could certainly not have been mistaken for somebody else. And yet—what was the meaning of that significant invitation: '*We are waiting only for you*'?

"'I thought you were a stranger,' he replied. 'I haven't the pleasure of knowing your name.'

"This was the climax. But I concealed my astonishment, having always found the *nil admirari* principle the safest in enterprises of this nature. Should I tell him my real name? Yes, why not? I was utterly unknown in London, and my real name would be as effective a disguise as a pseudonym.

"'Mendoza,' I replied.

"'Ah,' said the man of the doorstep. 'Any relation to the Mendozas of Highbury?'

"'I think not,' I replied, with an air of reflection.

"'Ah well,' said the second speaker, 'we are all brothers.'

"'And sisters,' I remarked, gallantly bowing to the beautiful maiden. On second thoughts it struck me the remark was rather meaningless, but second thoughts have an awkward way of succeeding first thoughts, which sometimes interferes with their usefulness. On third thoughts I went on in my best English: 'May I in return be favoured with the pleasure of knowing your name?'

"The second speaker smiled in a melancholy way, and said, 'I beg your pardon, I forgot we were as strange to you as you to us. My name is Radowski—Philip Radowski; this is my friend Martin, and this is my sister Fanny.'

"I distributed elaborate bows to the trinity.

"'You will have a little refreshment before you go?' said Fanny, with a simple charm that would have made it impossible to refuse, even if I had been as anxious to go as I was to stay. "Oh no, I could not think of troubling you,' I replied warmly; and in due course I was sipping a glass of excellent old port and crumbling a macaroon.

"This seemed to me the best time for putting out a feeler, and I remarked lightly, pointing to the photograph on the mantelpiece, 'I did not see that gentleman here to-night.' Instantly a portentous expression gathered upon all the faces. I saw I had said the wrong thing. The beautiful Fanny's mouth quivered, her eyes grew wistful and pathetic.

"'My father is dead,' she said, in a low tone.

"Dead? Her father? A great shock of horror and surprise traversed my frame. His secret had gone with him to the grave.

"'Dead!' I repeated involuntarily. 'Oh, forgive me, I did not know.'

"'Of course not, of course not. I understand perfectly,' put in her brother soothingly. 'You did not know whom it was we had lost. Yes, it was our father.'

"'Has he been dead long?'

"He seemed a little surprised at the question, but answered, 'It is he we are mourning now,' "I nodded my head, as if comprehending.

"'Ah, he was a good man,' said Martin. 'I wish we were all so sure of Heaven.'

"'There are very few Jews like him left,' said Fanny quietly.

"'Alas! he was one of the pious old school,' assented Martin, shaking his head dolefully.

"My heart was thumping violently as a great wave of light flooded my brain. These people, then, were Jews—that strange, scattered race of heretics I had often heard of, but never before come into contact with in my wild adventurous existence. The strange scene I had witnessed was not, then, a meeting of conspirators, but a religious funereal ceremonial; the sorrow of Fanny was filial grief; the address of the venerable old man a Hebrew prayer-reading; the short speech of Philip Radowski probably a psalm in the ancient language all spoke so fluently. But still, what had I come to do in that galley?

"All these thoughts flashed upon me in the twinkling of an eye. There was scarce a pause between Martin's observation and Radowski's remark that followed it:

"'He was, indeed, pious. It was wonderful how he withstood the influence of his English friends. You would never imagine he left Poland quite thirty years ago.'

"So I had found the Pole! But was it too late? Anyhow I resolved to know what I had been summoned for. The saints spared me the trouble of the search.

"'Yes,' returned Martin, 'when you think how ready he was to go to the houses of mourners, I think it perfectly disgraceful that we had such difficulty in getting together ten brother-Jews for the services in his memory. But for the kindness of Mr. Mendoza I don't know what we should have done to-night. In your place, Philip, I confess I should have felt tempted to violate the Law altogether. I can't see that it matters to the Almighty whether you have nine men or ten men or five men. And I don't see why Fanny couldn't count in quite as well as any man.'

"'O Martin!' said Fanny, with a shocked look, 'how can you talk so irreligiously? Once we begin to break the Law, where are we to stop? Jews and Christians may as well intermarry at once.' Her righteous indignation was beautiful to see.

"Two things were clear now. First, I had been mistaken for a Jew, probably on account of my foreign appearance. Secondly, Fanny would never wed a Christian. But for the first fact I would have regretted the second. For a third thing was clear—that I loved the glorious Jewess with all the love of a child of the South. We are not tame rabbits, we Andalusians: the flash from beauty's eye fires our blood, and we love instantly and dare greatly. My heart glowed with gratitude to my patron saint for having brought about the mistake; a Jew I was, and a Jew I would remain.

"'You are quite right, Miss Radowski,' I said; 'Jew and Christian might as well intermarry at once.'

"'I am glad to hear you say so,' said Fanny, turning her lovely orbs towards me. 'Most young men now-a-days are so irreligious.'

"Martin darted a savage glance at me. I saw at once how the land lay. He was either engaged to my darling, or a *fiancé* in the making. I surveyed him impassively from his head to his shoes, and decided to stand in them. It was impossible to permit a man of such dubious religious principles to link his life with a spiritually-minded woman like Fanny. Such a union could only bring unhappiness to both. What she needed was a good pious Jew, one of

"READ IT ALOUD," SHE SAID, "IT COMFORTS ME."

the old school. With the help of the saints I vowed to supply her needs.

"'I think that modern young women are quite as irreligious as modern young men,' retorted Martin, as he left the room.

"'Yes, it is so,' sighed Fanny, the arrow glancing off unheeded. Then, uplifting her beautiful eyes heavenwards, she murmured, 'Ah, if they had been blessed with fathers like mine!'

"Martin, who had only gone out for an instant, returned with Fanny's hat and a feather boa, and observing, 'You must really take a walk at once—you have been confined indoors a whole week,' helped her to put them on. I felt sure his zeal for her health was overbalanced by his enthusiasm for my departure. I could not very well attach myself to the walking party—especially as I only felt an attachment for one member of it. Disregarding the interruption, I remarked, in tones of fervent piety:

"'It will be an eternal regret to me that I missed knowing your father.'

"She gave me a grateful look.

"'Look!' she said, seating herself on the sofa for a moment, and picking up the richly-bound book lying upon it,—'look at the motto of exhortation he wrote in my prayer-book before he died. Our minister says it is in the purest Hebrew.'

"I went to her side and leaned over the richly-bound book, which appeared to be printed backwards, and scanned the inscription with an air of appreciation.

"'Read it,' she said, 'read it aloud! It comforts me to hear it.'

"I coughed violently, and felt myself growing pale. The eyes of Martin were upon me with an expression that seemed waiting to become sardonic. I called inwardly upon the Holy Mother. There seemed to be only a few words, and after a second's hesitation I murmured something in my most inarticulate manner, producing some sounds approximately like those I had heard during the service.

"Fanny looked up at me, puzzled.

"'I do not understand your pronunciation,' she said.

"I felt ready to sink into the sofa.

"'Ah, I am not surprised,' put in her brother. "From Mr. Mendoza's name and appearance I should take him to be a Sephardi, like the Mendozas of Highbury. They pronounce quite differently from us, Fanny.'

"I commended him to the grace of the Virgin.

"'That is so,' I admitted. 'And I found it not at all easy to follow your services.'

"'Are you an English Sephardi or a native Sephardi?' asked Martin.

"'A native!' I replied readily. 'I was born there.' Where 'there' was I had no idea.

"'Do you know,' said Fanny, looking so sweetly into my face, 'I should like to see your country. Spain has always seemed to me so romantic, and I dote on Spanish olives.'

"I was delighted to find I had spoken the truth as to my nativity.

"'I shall be charmed to escort you,' I said, smiling.

"She smiled in response.

"'It is easy enough to go anywhere now-a-days,' said Martin surlily.

"'I wish you would go to the devil,' I thought. 'That would certainly be easy enough.'

"But it would have been premature to force my own company upon Fanny any longer. I relied upon the presence of death and her brother to hinder Martin's suit from developing beyond the point it had already reached. It remained to be seen whether the damage was irreparable. I went again on the Saturday night, following with interest the service that had seemed a council-meeting. This time it began with singing, in which everybody joined, and in which I took part with hearty inarticulateness. But a little experience convinced me that my course was beset with pitfalls—that not Mary Jane aspiring to personify a Duchess could glide on thinner ice than I attempting to behave as one of these strange people, with their endless and all-embracing network of religious etiquette. To my joy I discovered that I could pursue my suit without going to synagogue, a place of dire peril, for it seems that the Spaniards are a distinct sect, mightily proud of their blood and their peculiar pronunciation; and the Radowskis, being Poles, did not expect to see me worshipping with themselves, which enabled me to continue my devotions in the Holy Chapel of St. Vincent. It also enabled me to skate over many awkward moments, the Poles being indifferently informed as to the etiquette of their Peninsular cousins. That I should have been twice taken for one of their own race rather surprised me, for my physiognomical relationship to it seemed of the slightest. The dark complexion, the foreign air, doubtless gave me a superficial resemblance, and in the face it is the surface that tells. I read up Spanish history, and learnt that many Jews had become Christians during the persecutions of the Holy Inquisition, and that many had escaped the fires of the *auto da fé* by feigning conversion, the while secretly performing their strange rites, and handing down to their descendants the traditions of secrecy and of Judaism, these unhappy people being styled Marranos. Perchance I was sprung from some such source, but there was no hint of it in my genealogy, so far as known to me; my name Mendoza was a good old Andalusian name, and my ancestors had for generations been good sons of the only true Church. The question has no interest for me now.

"For although, like Cæsar, I am entitled to say that I came, saw, and conquered, conquering not only Fanny but my rival, yet am I still a bachelor. I had driven Martin on one side as easily as a steamer bearing down upon a skiff, yet my own lips betrayed me. It was the desire to penetrate the mystery of the restaurant that undid me, for if a woman cannot keep a secret, a man cannot refrain from fathoming one. The rose-gardens of love were open for my walking, when the demon in possession prompted me to speech that silvered the red roses with hoar-frost and ice.

"One day I sat holding her dear hand in mine. She permitted me no more complex caresses, being still in black. Such was the sense of duty of this beautiful warm-blooded Oriental creature, that she was as cold as her father's tombstone, and equally eulogistic of his virtues. She spoke of them now, though I would fain have diverted the talk to hers. Failing that, I seized the opportunity to solve the haunting puzzle, forgetting Balthasar Gracian's sage advice: *Saberse dexar ganando con la fortuna*—Leave your luck while winning.

"'Do you know, I fancy I once saw your father,' I said earnestly.

"'Indeed!' she observed, with much interest. 'Where?'

"'In a restaurant not many miles from here. It was before noon.'

"'In a restaurant?' she repeated. "Hardly very likely. There isn't any restaurant near here he would be likely to go to, and certainly not at the time you mention, when he would be in the City. You must be mistaken.'

"I shook my head. 'I don't think so. I remember his face so well. When I saw his photo I recognised him at once.'

"'How long ago was it?'

"'I can tell you exactly,' I said. 'The date is graven on my heart. It was the twenty-fourth of October.'

"'This year?'

"'This year.'

"'The twenty-fourth of October!' she repeated musingly. 'Only a few weeks before he died. Poor father, peace be upon him! The twenty-fourth of October, did you say?' she added suddenly.

"'What is the matter?' I asked. 'You are agitated.'

"'No, it is nothing. It cannot be,' she added more calmly. 'Of course not.' She smiled faintly. 'I thought——' she paused.

"'You thought what?'

"'Oh, well, I'll show you I was mistaken.' She rose, went to the book-case, drew out a little brown-paper-covered volume, and turned over the pages scrutinisingly. Suddenly a change came over the beautiful face; she stood motionless, pale as a statue.

"A chill shadow fell across my heart, distracted between tense curiosity and dread of a tragic solution.

"'My dear Fanny, what in Heaven's name is it?' I breathed.

"'Don't speak of Heaven," said Fanny, in strange harsh tones, 'when you libel the dead thus.'

"'Libel the dead! How?'

"'Why, the twenty-fourth of October was *Yom Kippur!*'

"'Well,' I said, unimpressed and uncomprehending, 'and what of it?'

"She stared at me, staggered, and clutched at the bookcase for support.

"'What of it?' she cried, in passionate emotion. 'Do you dare to say that you saw my poor father, who was righteousness itself, breaking his fast in a restaurant on the Day of Atonement? Perhaps you will insinuate next that his speedy death was Heaven's punishment on him for his blasphemy?'

"In the same instant I saw the truth and my terrible blunder. This fast-day must be of awful solemnity, and Fanny's father must have gone systematically to a surreptitious breakfast in that queer out-of-the-way restaurant. His nervousness, his want of ease, his terror at the sight of me, whom he mistook for a brother-Jew, were all accounted for. Once a year—the discrepancy in the date being explained by the discord between Jewish and Christian chronology—he hied his way furtively to this unholy meal, enjoying it and a reputation for sanctity at the same time. But to expose her father's hypocrisy to the trusting innocent girl would be hardly the way to advance love-matters. It might be difficult even to repair the mischief I had already done.

"'I beg your pardon,' I said humbly. 'You were right. I was misled by some chance resemblance. If your father was the pious Jew you paint him, it is impossible he could have been the man I saw. Yes, and now I think of it, the eyebrows were bushier and the chin plumper than those of the photograph.'

"A sigh of satisfaction escaped her lips. Then her face grew rigid again as she turned it upon me, and asked, in low tones that cut through me like an icy blast, 'Yes, but what were *you* doing in the restaurant on the Day of Atonement?'

"'I—I—?' I stammered.

"Her look was terrible.

"'I—I—was only having a cup of chocolate," I replied, with a burst of inspiration.

"As everybody knows, since the pronunciamento of Pope Paul V., chocolate may be imbibed by good Catholics without breaking the fasts of the Church. But alas! it seems these fanatical Eastern flagellants allow not even a drop of cold water to pass their lips for over twenty-four hours.

"'I am glad you confess it,' said Fanny witheringly. 'It shows you have still one redeeming trait. And I am glad you spoke ill of my poor father, for it has led to the revelation of your true character before it was too late. You will of course understand, Mr. Mendoza, that our acquaintance is at an end.'

"'Fanny!' I cried frantically.

"'Spare me a scene, I beg of you,' she said coldly. 'You—you, the man who pretended to such ardent piety, to such enthusiasm for our holy religion—are an apostate from the faith into which you were born, a blasphemer, an atheist.'

"I stared at her in dumb horror. I had entangled myself inextricably. How could I now explain that it was her father who was the renegade, not I?

"'Good-bye," said Fanny. 'Heaven make you a better Jew.'

"I moved desperately towards her, but she waved me back. 'Dont touch me,' she cried. 'Go, go!'

"'But is there no hope for me?' I exclaimed, looking wildly into the cold statue-like face, that seemed more beautiful than ever, now it was fading from my vision.

"'None,' she said. Then in a breaking voice she murmured, 'Neither for you nor for me.'

"'Ah, you love me still?' I cried, striving to embrace her. 'You will be my wife?'

"She struggled away from me. 'No, no,' she said, with a gesture of horror. 'It would be sacrilege to my dead father's memory. Rather would I marry a Christian—yes, even a Catholic—than an apostate Jew like you. Leave me, I pray you; or must I ring the bell?'

"I went—a sadder and a wiser man. But even my wisdom availed me not, for, when I repaired to the restaurant to impart it to the proprietor, this last consolation was denied me. He had sold his business and returned to Italy.

"To-morrow I start for Turkestan."

CHAPTER XII

THE ARITHMETIC AND PHYSIOLOGY OF LOVE

"WELL, have you seen this Fanny Radowski?" said Lord Silverdale, when he returned the manuscript to the President of the Old Maids' Club.

"Of course. Didn't I tell you I had the story from her own mouth, though I have put it into Mendoza's?"

"Ah yes, I remember now. It certainly is funny, her refusing a good Catholic on the ground that he was a bad Jew. But then, according to the story, she doesn't know he's a Catholic?"

"No; it was I who divined the joke of the situation. Lookers-on always see more of the game. I saw at once that if Mendoza were really a Jew he would never have been such an ass as to make the slip he did; and so, from this and several other things she told me about her lover, I constructed deductively the history you have read. She says she first met him at a mourning service in memory of her father, and that it is a custom among her people, when they have not enough men to form a religious quorum (the number is the mystical ten), to invite any brother-Jew, who may be passing, to step in, whether he is an acquaintance or not."

"And so she wishes to be an object-lesson in female celibacy, does she?" said the Honorary Trier.

"She is most anxious to enlist in the Cause."

"Is she really beautiful, et cetera?"

"She is magnificent."

"Then I should say the very member we are looking for. A Jewess will be an extremely valuable element of the Club, for her race exalts marriage even above happiness, and an old maid is even more despised than among us. The lovely Miss Radowski will be an eloquent protest against the prejudices of her people."

Lillie Dulcimer shook her head quietly. "The racial accident which makes her seem a desirable member to you, makes me regard her as impossible."

"How so?" cried Silverdale, in amazement. "You surely are not going to degrade your Club by anti-Semitism!"

"Heaven forfend! But a Jewess can never be a whole Old Maid."

"I don't understand."

"Look at it mathematically a moment."

Silverdale made a grimace.

"Consider. A Jewess, orthodox like Miss Radowski, can only be an Old Maid fractionally. An Old Maid must make "the grand refusal"—she must refuse mankind at large. Now Miss Radowski, being cut off by her creed from marrying into any but an insignificant percentage of mankind, is proportionately less valuable as an object-lesson; she is unfitted for the functions of Old Maidenhood in their full potentiality. Already by her religion she is condemned to almost total celibacy. She cannot renounce what she never possessed. There are in the world, roughly speaking, eight million Jews among a population of a thousand millions. Assuming, for the sake of simplicity, that the ratio of males to females is constant, the force of her example—in other words, her value as an Old Maid—may be represented by ·008."

"I am glad you express her as a decimal rather than a vulgar fraction," said Lord Silverdale, laughing. "But you erroneously postulate that the ordinary girl has the run of mankind in all its tribes and religions. As a mathematical wrangler, you are not very terrible. So I shall not need to try Miss Radowski?"

"No, we cannot entertain her application," said Lillie peremptorily, the thunder-cloud no bigger than a man's hand gathering on her brow at the suspicion that Silverdale did not take her mathematics seriously. Considering that, in keeping him at arm's length, her motives were merely mathematical (though Lord Silverdale was not aware of this), she was peculiarly sensitive on the point. She changed the subject quickly by asking what poem he had brought her.

"Do not call them poems!" he answered.

"It is only between ourselves. There are no critics about."

"Thank you so much. I have brought one suggested by the strange farrago of religions that figured in your last human document. It is a pæan on the growing hospitality of the peoples towards the gods of other nations.

There was a time when free trade in divinities was taboo, each nation protecting, and protected by, its own. Now foreign gods are all the rage.

THE END-OF-THE-CENTURY CATHOLIC CREDO

I'm a Christo-Jewish Quaker,
Moslem, Atheist, and Shaker,
Auld Licht Church of England Fakir,
Antinomian, Baptist, Deist,
Gnostic, Neo-Pagan Theist,
Presbyterianish Papist,
Comtist, Mormon, Darwin-apist,
Trappist, High Church Unitarian,
Sandemanian Sabbatarian,
Plymouth Brother, Walworth Jumper,
Southcote South-Place Bible-Thumper,
Christadelphian, Platonic,
Old Moravian, Masonic,
Corybantic Christi-antic,
Ethic-culture Transatlantic,
Anabaptist, Neo-Buddhist,
Zoroastrian Talmudist,
Lao-tsean, Theosophic,
Table-rapping, Philosophic,
Mediæval-Monkish Mystic,
Modern Mephistophelistic,
Hellenistic, Calvinistic,
Brahministic, Cabalistic,
Humanistic, Tolstoïstic,
Rather Robert Elsmeristic,
Altruistic Hedonistic,
And Agnostic Manichæan,
Worshipping the Galilean.

For with equal zeal I follow
Siva, Allah, Zeus, Apollo,
Mumbo Jumbo, Dagon, Brahma,
Buddha *alias* Gautama,

Jahvé, Juggernaut and Juno,
Plus some gods that but the few know—
Dzohl, Oannes, eke Potrimpos,
From Sclavonian Olympos.

Though I reverence the Mishna,
I can bend the knee to Krishna;
I obey the latest mode in
Recognising Thor and Odin,
Just as freely as the Virgin;
For the Pope and Mr. Spurgeon,
Moses, Paul, and Zoroaster,
Each to me is seer and master.
I consider Heine, Hegel,
Schopenhauer, Shelley, Schlegel,
Diderot, Savonarola,
Dante, Rousseau, Goethe, Zola,
Whitman, Renan (priest of Paris),
Transcendental Prophet Harris,
Ibsen, Carlyle, Huxley, Pater,
Each than all the others greater.

And I read the Zend-Avesta,
Koran, Bible, Roman *Gesta*,
Ind's Upanischads and Spencer,
With affection e'er intenser.

For these many appellations
Of the gods of different nations,
I believe—from Bel to Sun-god—
All at bottom cover *one* god.
Him I worship—dropping gammon—
And his mighty name is MAMMON.

"You are very hard upon the century—or rather upon the end of it," said Lillie.

"The century is dying unshriven," said the satirist solemnly. "Its conscience must be stirred. Truly, was there ever an age which had so much light and so little sweetness? In the reckless fight for gold, Society has become a mutual swindling association. Cupidity has ousted Cupid, and everything is bought and sold."

"Except your poems, Lord Silverdale," laughed Lillie. It was tit for the tat of his raillery of her mathematics.

Before his lordship had time to make the clever retort he thought of next day, Turple the Magnificent brought in a card.

"Miss Winifred Woodpecker?" said Lillie queryingly. "I suppose it's another candidate. Show her in."

Miss Woodpecker was a tall, stately girl, of the kind that passes for lilies in the flowery language of the novelists.

"Have I the pleasure of speaking to Miss Dulcimer?"

"Yes, I am Miss Dulcimer," said Lillie.

"And where is the Old Maids' Club?" further inquired Miss Woodpecker, looking around curiously.

"Here," replied Lillie, indicating the epigrammatic antimacassars with a sweeping gesture. "No, don't go, Lord Silverdale. Miss Woodpecker, this is my friend Lord Silverdale. He knows all about the Club, so you needn't mind speaking before him."

"Well, you know, I read the leader in the *Hurrygraph* about your Club this morning."

"Oh, is there a leader?" said Lillie feverishly. "Have you seen it, Lord Silverdale?"

"I am not sure. At first I fancied it referred to the Club, but there was such a lot about Ptolemy, Rosa Bonheur's animals, and the Panama Canal, I can hardly venture to say what the leader itself was about. And so, Miss Woodpecker, you have thought of joining our institution for elevating female celibacy into a fine art?"

"I wish to join at once. Is there any entrance fee?"

"There *is*—experience. Have you had a desirable proposal of marriage?"

"Eminently desirable."

"And still you do not intend to marry?"

"Not while I live."

"Ah, that is all the guarantee we want," said Lord Silverdale smiling. "Afterwards—in heaven—there is no marrying nor giving in marriage."

"That is what makes it heaven," added Lillie. "But tell us your story."

"It was in this way. I was staying at a seaside boarding-house with a female cousin, and a handsome young man in the house fell in love with me, and we were secretly engaged. Then my mother came down. Immediately afterwards my lover disappeared. He left a note for me containing nothing but the following verses."

She handed a double tear-stained sheet of letter-paper to the President, who read aloud as follows:—

A VISION OF THE FUTURE

"Well is it for man that he knoweth not what the future will bring forth."

She had a sweetly spiritual face,
Touched with a noble, stately grace,
Poetic heritage of race.

Her form was graceful, slim and sweet,
Her frock was exquisitely neat,
With airy tread she paced the street.

She seemed some fantasy of dream,
A flash of loveliness supreme,
A poet's visionary gleam.

And yet she was of mortal birth,
A lovely child of lovely earth,
For kisses made and joy and mirth.

THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE.

Sweet whirling thoughts my bosom throng,
To link her life with mine I long,
And shrine her in immortal song.

I steal another glance—and lo!
Dread shudders through my being flow
My veins are filled with liquid snow.

Another form beside her walks,
Of servants and expenses talks,—
Her nose is not unlike a hawk's.

Her face is plump, her figure fat,
She's prose embodied, stout gone flat,—
A comfortable Persian cat.

Her life is full of petty fuss,
She wobbles like an omnibus,
And yet it was not always thus.

Alas for perishable grace!
How unmistakeably I trace
The daughter's in the mother's face.

Beneath the beak I see the nose,
The poetry beneath the prose,
The figure 'neath the adipose.

And so I sadly turn away:
How *can* I love a clod of clay,
Doomed to grow earthlier day by day?

Vain, vain the hope from Fate to flee,
What special Providence for me?
I know that what hath been will be.

Lillie and Silverdale looked at each other.

"Well but," said Lillie at last, "according to this he refused you, not you him. Our rules——"

"You mistake me," interrupted Winifred Woodpecker;

"when the first fit of anguish was over, I saw my Frank was right, and I have refused all the offers I have had since —five in all. It would not be fair to a lover to chain him to a beauty so transient. In ten or twenty years from now I shall go the way of all flesh. Under such circumstances is not marriage a contract entered into under false pretences? There is no chance of the law of this country allowing a time-limit to be placed in the contract; celibacy is the only honest policy for a woman."

Involuntarily Lillie's hand seized the candidate's and gripped it sympathetically. She divined a sister soul.

"You teach me a new point of view," she said, "a finer shade of ethical feeling."

Silverdale groaned inwardly; he saw a new weapon going into the anti-hymeneal armoury, and the Old Maids' Club on the point of being strengthened by the accession of its first member.

"The law will have to accommodate itself to these finer shades," pursued Lillie energetically. "It is a rusty machine out of harmony with the age. Science has discovered that the entire physical organism is renewed every seven years, and yet the law calmly goes on assuming that the new man and the new woman are still bound by the contract of their predecessors, and still possess the goodwill of the original partnership. It seems to me if the short-lease principle demanded by physiology is not to be conceded, there should at any rate be provincial and American rights in marriage as well as London rights. In the metropolis the matrimonial contract should hold good with A, in the country with B, neither party infringing the other's privileges, in accordance with theatrical analogy."

"That is a literal latitudinarianism in morals you will never get the world to agree to," laughed Lord Silverdale.

"At least not in theory; we cannot formally sanction theatrical practice."

"Do not laugh," said Lillie. "Law must be brought more in touch with life."

"Isn't it rather *vice versâ?* Life must be brought more in touch with law. However, if Miss Woodpecker feels these fine ethical shades, won't she be ineligible?"

"How so?" said the President, in indignant surprise.

"By our second rule every candidate must be beautiful, and undertake to continue so."

Poor little Lillie drooped her head.

And now it behoves to reveal to the world the jealously-guarded secret of "The English Shakespeare," for how else can the tale be told of how the Old Maids' Club was within an ace of robbing him of his bride?

CHAPTER XIII

"THE ENGLISH SHAKESPEARE"

By a thorough knowledge of the natural laws which govern the operations of human nature, and by a careful application of the fine properties of well-selected men, and a judicious use of every available instrument of log-rolling, the Mutual Depreciation Society gradually built up a constitution strong enough to defy every tendency to disintegration. Hundreds of subtle malcontents floated round, ready to attack wherever there was a weak point, but foiled by ignorance of the Society's existence, and the members escaped many a fatal shaft by keeping themselves entirely to themselves. The idea of the Mutual Depreciation Society was that every member should say what he thought of the others. The founders, who all took equal shares in it, were

Tom Brown,
Dick Jones,
Harry Robinson.

Their object in founding the Mutual Depreciation Society was of course to achieve literary success; but they soon perceived that their phalanx was too small for this, and as they had no power without adding to their number, they took steps to induce three other gentlemen to solicit the privileges of membership. The second batch comprised

Taffy Owen,
Andrew Mackay,
Patrick Boyle.

These six gentlemen being all blessed with youth, health, and a moderate incompetence, resolved to capture the town. Their tactics were simple, though their first operations were hampered by ignorance of one another's ignorance. Thus, it was some time before it was discovered that Mackay, who had been deployed to seize the *Saturday Slasher*, had no real acquaintance with the editor's fencing-master, while Dick Jones, who had undertaken to bombard the *Acadæum*, had started under the impression that the eminent critic to whom he had dedicated his poems (by permission) was still connected with the staff. But these difficulties were eliminated as soon as the Society got into working order. Everything comes to him who will not wait, and almost before they had time to wink our six gentlemen had secured the makings of an Influence. Each had loyally done his best for himself and the rest, and the first spoils of the campaign, as announced amid applause by the secretary at the monthly dinner, were

Two Morning Papers,
Two Evening Papers,
Two Weekly Papers.

They were not the most influential, nor even the best-circulated, still it was not a bad beginning, though, of course, only a nucleus. By putting out tentacles in every direction, by undertaking to write even on subjects with which they were acquainted, they gradually secured a more or less tenacious connection with the majority of the better journals and magazines. On taking stock, they found that the account stood thus:

Three Morning Papers.
Four Evening Papers.
Eleven Weekly Papers.
Thirteen London Letters.
Seven Dramatic Columns.
Six Monthly Magazines.
Thirteen Influences on Advertisements.
Nine Friendships with Eminent Editors.
Seventeen ditto with Eminent Sub-editors.
Six ditto with Lady Journalists.
Fifty-three Loans (at two-and-six each) to Pressmen.
One hundred and nine Mentions of Editors' Womankind at Fashionable Receptions.

It showed what could be achieved by six men, working together shoulder to shoulder for the highest aims, in a spirit of mutual good-will and brotherhood. They were undoubtedly greatly helped by having all been to Oxford or

Cambridge, but still much was the legitimate result of their own manœuvres.

By the time the secret campaign had reached this stage, many well-meaning, unsuspecting men, not included in the above inventory, had been pressed into the service of the Society, with the members of which they were connected by the thousand and one ties which spring up naturally in the intercourse of the world, so that there was hardly any journal in the three kingdoms on which the Society could not, by some hook or crook, fasten a paragraph, if we except such publications as the *Newgate Calendar* and *Lloyds' Shipping List*, which record history rather than make it.

Indeed, the success of the Society in this department was such as to suggest the advisability of having themselves formally incorporated under the Companies' Acts for the manufacture and distribution of paragraphs, for which they had unequalled facilities, and had obtained valuable concessions, and it was only the publicity required by law which debarred them from enlarging their home trade to a profitable industry for the benefit of non-members. For, by the peculiar nature of the machinery, it could only be worked if people were unaware of its existence. They resolved, however, that when they had made their pile, they would start the newspaper of the future, which any philosopher with an eye to the trend of things can see will be a journal written by advertisers for gentlemen, and will contain nothing calculated to bring a blush to the cheek of the young person except cosmetics.

Contemporaneously with the execution of one side of the plan of campaign, the Society was working the supplementary side. Day and night, week-days and Sundays, in season and out, these six gentlemen praised themselves and one another, or got themselves or one another praised by non-members. There are many ways in which you can praise an author, from blame downwards. There is the puff categorical and the puff allusive, the lie direct and the eulogy insinuative, the downright abuse and the subtle innuendo, the exaltation of your man or the depression of his rival. The attacking method of log-rolling must not be confounded with depreciation. In their outside campaign, the members used every variety of puff, but depreciation was strictly reserved for their private gatherings. For this was the wisdom of the club, and herein lay its immense superiority over every other log-rolling club, that whereas in those childish cliques every man is expected to admire every other, or to say so, in the Mutual Depreciation Society the obligation was all the other way. Every man was bound by the rules to sneer at the work of his fellow-members, and if he should happen to admire any of it, at least to have the grace to keep his feelings to himself. In practice, however, the latter contingency never arose, and each was able honestly to express all he thought, for it is impossible for men to work together for a common object without discovering that they do not deserve to get it. Needless to point out how this sagacious provision strengthened them in their campaign, for not having to keep up the tension of mutual admiration, and being able to relax and breathe (and express themselves) freely at their monthly symposia, as well as to slang one another in the street, they were able to write one another up with a clear conscience. It is well to found on human nature. Every other basis proves shifting sand. The success of the Mutual Depreciation Society justified their belief in human nature.

Not only did they depreciate one another, but they made reparation to the non-members they were always trying to write down during business hours, by eulogising them in the most generous manner in those blessed hours of leisure when knife answers fork, and soul speaks to soul. At such times even popular authors were allowed to have a little merit.

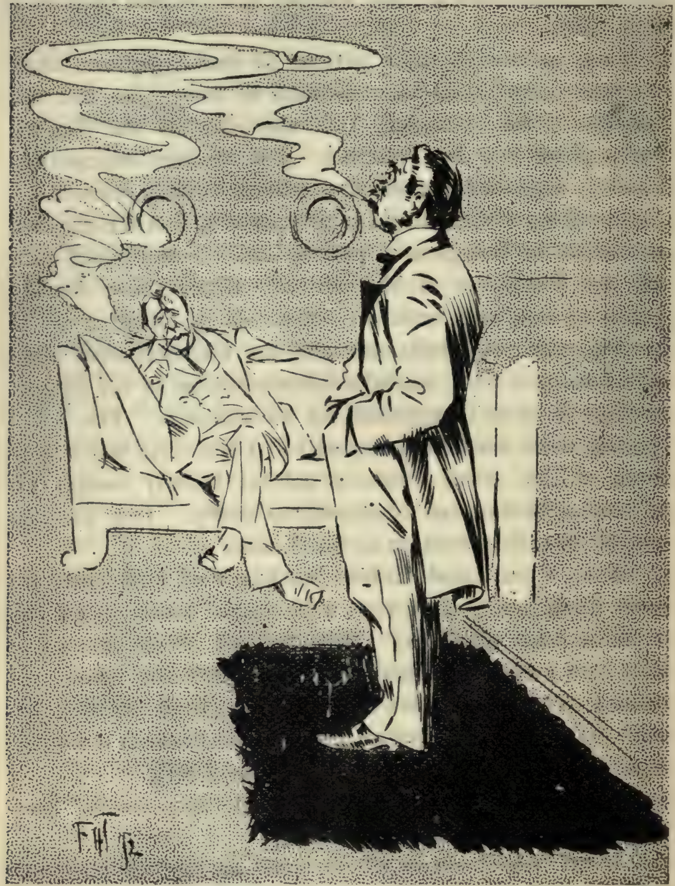
It was at one of these periods of soul-expansion, when the most petty-souled feels inclined to loosen the last two buttons of his waistcoat, that the idea of the English Shakespeare was first mooted. But we are anticipating, which is imprudent, as anticipations are seldom realised.

One of the worst features of prosperity is that it is cloying, and when the first gloss of novelty and adventure had worn off, the freelances of the Mutual Depreciation Society began to bore one another. You can get tired even of hearing your own dispraises; and the members were compelled to spice their mutual adverse criticism in the highest manner, so as to compensate for its staleness. The jaded appetite must needs be pampered if it is to experience anything of that relish which a natural healthy hunger for adverse criticism can command so easily. This was the sort of thing that went on at the dinners :—

"I say, Tom," said Andrew Mackay, "what in Heaven's name made you publish your waste-paper basket under the name of *Stray Thoughts?* For utter and incomprehensible idiocy they are only surpassed by Dick's last volume of poems. I shouldn't have thought such things could come even out of a lunatic asylum, certainly not without a keeper. Really you fellows ought to consider me a little——"

"We do. We consider you as little as possible," they interrupted simultaneously.

"It isn't fair to throw all the work on me," he went on. "How can I go on saying that Tom Brown is the supreme thinker of the time, the deepest intellect since Hegel, with a gift of style that rivals Berkeley's, if you go on turning out twaddle that a copy-book would boggle at? How can I keep repeating that for sure and consummate art, for



TOM BROWN, THE SUPREME THINKER.

unfailing certainty of insight, for unerring visualisation, for objective subjectivity and for subjective objectivity, for Swinburnian sweep of music and Shakespearean depth of suggestiveness, Dick Jones can give forty in a hundred (spot-stroke barred) to all other contemporary poets, if you continue to vomit rhymes as false as your teeth, rhythms as musical as your voice when you read them, and words that would drive a drawing-room composer mad with envy to set them? I maintain it is not sticking to the bargain to expose me to the danger of being found out. You ought at least to have the decency to wrap up your fatuousness in longer words or more abstruse themes. You're both so beastly intelligible that a child can understand you're asses."

"Tut, tut, Andrew," said Taffy Owen, "it's all very well for you to talk who've only got to do the criticism. And I think it's deuced ungrateful of you after we've written you up into the position of leading English critic to want us to give you straw for your bricks! Do we ever complain when you call us cataclysmic, creative, esemplastic, or even epicene? We know it's rot, but we put up with it. When you said that Robinson's last novel had all the glow and genius of Dickens without his humour, all the ripe wisdom of Thackeray without his social knowingness, all the imaginativeness of Shakespeare without his definiteness of characterisation, we all saw at once that you were incautiously allowing the donkey's ears to protrude too obviously from beneath the lion's skin. But did any one grumble? Did Robinson, though the edition was sold out the day after? Did I, though you had just called me a modern Buddhist, with the soul of an ancient Greek and the radiant fragrance of a Cingalese tea-planter? I know these phrases take the public, and I try to be patient."

"Owen is right," Harry Robinson put in emphatically.

"When you said I was a cross between a Scandinavian skald and a Dutch painter, I bore my cross in silence."

"Yes; but what else can a fellow say, when you give the public such heterogeneous and formless balderdash, that there is nothing for it but to pretend it's a new style, an epoch-making work, the foundation of a new era in literary art? Really I think you others have out and away the best of it. It's much easier to write bad books than to eulogise their merits in an adequately plausible manner! I think it's playing it too low upon a chap, the way you fellows are going on. It's taking a mean advantage of my position."

"And who put you into that position, I should like to know?" yelled Dick Jones, becoming poetically excited. "Didn't we lift you up into it on the point of our pens?"

"Fortunately they were not very pointed," ejaculated the great critic, wriggling uncomfortably at the suggestion. "I don't deny that, of course. All I say is, you're giving me away now."

"You give yourself away," shrieked Owen vehemently, "with a pound of that Cingalese tea. How is it Boyle manages to crack up our plays without being driven to any of this new-fangled nonsense?"

"Plays!" said Patrick, looking up moodily. "Anything is good enough for plays. You see I can always fall back on the acting, and crack up that. I had to do that with Owen's thing at the *Lymarket.* My notice read like a gushing account of the play,—in reality it was all devoted to the players. The trick of it is not easy. Those who can read between the lines could see that there were only three of them about the piece itself, and yet the outside public would never dream I was shirking expressing an opinion about the merits of the play or pinning myself to any definite statement. The only time, Owen, I dare say that your plays are literature, is when they are a frost, for that both explains the failure and justifies you. But, an' you love me, Taffy, or if you have any care for my reputation, do not, I beg of you, be enticed into the new folly of printing your plays."

"But things have come to that stage, I *must* do it," said Owen, "or incur the suspicion of illiterateness."

"No, no!" pleaded Patrick, in horror. "Sooner than that I will damn all the other printed plays *en bloc*, and say that the real literary playwrights, conscious of their position, are too dignified to resort to this cheap method of self-assertion. But you will not carry out your threat? Remember how dangerously near you came to exposing me over your *Naquette!*"

The Society laughed. Every one knew the incident, for it was Patrick's stock grievance against the dramatist. Patrick, being out of town, had written his eulogy of this play of Owen's from his inner consciousness. On the fourth night, being back in London, in deference to Owen's persuasions he had gone to see *Naquette.* After the tragedy, Owen found him seated moodily in the stalls, long after the audience had filed out.

"Knocked you, old man, this time, eh?" queried Owen, laughing complacently.

"Yes, all to pieces!" snarled Patrick savagely. "I shall never believe in my critical judgment again. I dare not look my notice in the face. When I wrote that *Naquette* was a masterpiece, I thought at least there would be some merit in it. I didn't bargain for such rot as this."

In this wise things would have gone on—from bad to worse—had Heaven not created Cecilia nineteen years before.

Cecilia was a tall, fair girl, with dreamy blue eyes and unpronounced opinions, who longed for the ineffable with an unspeakable yearning.

Frank Grey loved her. He always knew he was going to, and one day he did it. After that it was impossible to drop the habit. And at last he went so far as to propose. He was a young lawyer, with a fondness for manly sports and a wealth of blonde moustache.

"KNOCKED YOU, OLD MAN, THIS TIME, EH?"

" Cecilia," he said, "I love you. Will you be mine?"

He had a habit of using unconventional phrases.

"No, Frank," she said gently, and there was a world and several satellites of tenderness in her tremulous tones, "It cannot be."

"Ah, do not decide so quickly," he pleaded. "I will not press you for an answer."

"I would press you for an answer, if I could," replied Cecilia, "but I do not love you."

"Why not?" he demanded desperately.

"Because you are not what I should like you to be."

"And what would you like me to be?" he demanded eagerly.

"If I told you, you would try to become it?"

"I would," he said enthusiastically. "Be it what it may, I would leave no stone unturned. I would work, strive, study, reform—anything, everything."

"I feared so," she said despondently. "That is why I will not tell you. Don't you understand that your charm to me is your being just yourself—your simple, honest, manly self? I will not have my enjoyment of your individuality spoilt by your transmogrification into some unnatural product of the forcing-house. No, Frank, let us be true to ourselves, not to each other. I shall always remain your friend, looking up to you as to something staunch, sturdy, stalwart, coming to consult you (unprofessionally) in all my difficulties. I will tell you all my secrets, Frank, so that you will know more of me than if I married you. Dear friend, let it remain as I say. It is for the best."

So Frank went away broken-hearted, and joined the Mutual Depreciation Society. He did not care what became of him. How they came to let him in was thus. He was the one man in the world outside, who knew all about them, having been engaged as the Society's legal adviser. It was he who made their publishers and managers sit in an erect position. In applying for a more intimate connection, he stated that he had met with a misfortune, and a little monthly abuse would enliven him. The Society decided that, as he was already half one of themselves, and as he had never written a line in his life and so could not diminish their takings, nothing but good could ensue from the infusion of new blood. In fact, they wanted it badly. Their mutual recriminations had degenerated into mere platitudes. With a new man to insult and be insulted by, something of the old animation would be restored to their proceedings. The wisdom of the policy was early seen, for the first fruit of it was "the English Shakespeare," who for a whole year daily opened out new and exciting perspectives of sensation and amusement to a *blasé* Society. Andrew Mackay had written an enthusiastic article in the so-called *Nineteenth Century* on "The Cochin-China Shakespeare," and set all tongues wagging about the new literary phenomenon, with whose verses the boatmen of the Irrawadi rocked their children to sleep on the cradle of the river, and whose dramas were played in eight-hour slices in the strolling-booths of Shanghai. Andrew had already arranged with Anyman to bring out a translation from the original Cochin-Chinese, for there was no language he could not translate from, provided it were sufficiently unknown to need his patronage.

"Cochin-Chinese Shakespeare, indeed!" said Dick Jones at the next symposium. "Why, judging from the copious extracts you gave from his greatest drama, *Baby Bantam*, it is the most tedious drivel. You might have written it yourself. Where is the Shakespearean quality of this, which is, you say, the whole of Act thirteen :—

> HANG-HO. Out, does your mother, Fu-sia, know you are?
> FU-SIA. I have no mother, but I have a child."

" Where is the Shakespearean quality ? " repeated Andrew. " Do you not feel the perfect pathos of these two lines, the infiniteness of incisive significance ? To me they paint the whole scene in two strokes of matchless simplicity, strophe and antistrophe. Fu-sia, the repentant outcast, and Hang-ho, whose honest love she rejected, stand out as in a

"SHE TOLD ME SHE COULDN'T SLEEP TILL SHE HAD READ IT."

flash of lightning. Nay, Shakespeare himself never wrote an act of such tragic brevity, packed so full of the sense of *ἀνάγκη*. Why, so far from it being tedious drivel, a lady, in whose opinion I have great confidence, and to whom I sent my article, told me afterwards that she couldn't sleep till she had read it."

The Mutual Depreciation Society burst into a roar of laughter, and Andrew realised that he had put his foot in it.

"Don't you think it a shame," broke in Frank Grey, "that we English are debarred from having a Shakespeare? There's been one discovered lately in Belgium, and we have already a Dutch Shakespeare, a French, a Cuban, a German, a Scandinavian, and an American Shakespeare. English is the only language in which we can't get one. It seems cruel that we should be just the one nation in the world to be cut off from having a nineteenth-century Shakespeare. Every patriotic Briton must surely desire that we could discover an English Shakespeare to put beside these vaunted foreign phenomena."

"But an 'English Shakespeare' is a bull," said Patrick Boyle, who had a keen eye for such.

"Precisely—a John Bull," replied Frank.

"Peace! I would willingly look out for one," said Andrew Mackay thoughtfully. "But I cannot venture to insinuate yet that Shakespeare did not write English. The time is scarcely ripe, though it is maturing fast. Otherwise, the idea is very tempting."

"But why take the words in their natural meaning?" demanded Tom Brown, the philosopher, in astonishment. "Is it not unapparent that an English Shakespeare would be a great writer more saturated with Anglo-Saxon spirit than Shakespeare, who was cosmic and for all time and for every place? Hamlet, Othello, Lady Macbeth—these are world-types, not English characters. Our English Shakespeare must be more autochthonous, more chauvinist, more provincial, or more *borné*, if you like to put it that way. His scenes must be rooted in English life, and his personages must smack of English soil."

There was much table-thumping when the philosopher ceased.

"Excellent!" cried Andrew. "He must be found. It will be the greatest boom of the century. But whom can we discover?"

"There is John P. Smith," said Tom Brown.

"No. Why John P. Smith? He has merit," objected Taffy Owen. "And then, he has never been in our set."

"And besides, he would not be satisfied," said Patrick Boyle.

"That is true," said Andrew Mackay reflectively. "I know, Owen, *you* would like to be the subject of the discovery. But I am afraid it is too late. I have taken your measurements and laid down the chart of your genius too definitely to alter now. You are permanently established in business as the dainty Neo-Hellenic Buddhist who has chosen to express himself through farcical comedy. If you were just starting life, I could work you into this English Shakespeardom—I am always happy to put a good thing in the way of a friend; but at your age it is not easy to go into a new line."

"Well, but," put in Harry Robinson, "if none of us is to be 'the English Shakespeare,' why should we give over the appointment to an outsider? Charity begins at home."

"That *is* a difficulty," admitted Andrew, puckering his brow. "It brings us to a standstill. Seductive, therefore, as the idea is, I am afraid it has occurred to us too late."

They sat in thoughtful silence. Then suddenly Frank Grey flashed in with a suggestion that took their breath away for a moment, and restored it to them charged with "bravos" the moment after.

"But why should he exist at all?"

Why, indeed? The more they pondered the matter, the less necessity they saw for it.

"'Pon my honour, Grey, you are right," said Andrew. "Right as Talleyrand when he told the thief who insisted that he must live, '*Mais, monsieur, ie n'en vois pas la nécessité.*'"

"It's an inspiration!" said Tom Brown, moved out of his usual apathy. "We all remember how Whately proved that the Emperor Napoleon never existed—and the plausible way he did it. How few persons actually saw the Emperor! How did even these know that what they saw was the Emperor? Conversely, it should be as easy as possible for us six to put a non-existent English Shakespeare on the market. You remember what Voltaire said of God, that if there were none it would be necessary to invent Him. In like manner, patriotism calls upon us to invent 'the English Shakespeare.'"

"Yes; won't it be awful fun?" said Patrick Boyle.

The idea was taken up eagerly, the *modus operandi* was discussed, and the members parted effervescing with enthusiasm, and anxious to start the campaign immediately.

"The English Shakespeare" was to be named "Fladpick," a cognomen which, once seen, would hook itself on to the memory.

The very next day a leading article in the *Daily Herald* casually quoted Fladpick's famous line:

> Coffined in English yew, he sleeps in peace.

And throughout the next month, in the most out-of-the-way and unlikely quarters, the word "Fladpick" lurked and sprang upon the reader. Lines and phrases from Fladpick were quoted. Gradually the thing worked up, gathering momentum on its way, and going more and more of itself, like an ever-swelling snowball, which needed but the first push down the mountain-side. Soon a leprosy of Fladpick broke out over the journalism of the day. The very office-boys caught the infection, and in their book reviews they dragged in Fladpick with an air of antediluvian acquaintance. Writers were said not to possess Fladpick's imagination, though they might have more sense of style; or they were said not to possess Fladpick's sense of style, though they might have more imagination. Certain epithets and tricks of manner were described as quite Fladpickian; while others were mentioned as extravagant and as disdained by writers like, say, Fladpick. Young authors were paternally invited to mould themselves on Fladpick, while others were contemptuously dismissed as mere imitators of Fladpick. By this time Fladpick's poetic dramas began to be asked for at the libraries, but the libraries said they were all out. This increased the demand so much, that the libraries told their subscribers they must wait till the new edition, which was being hurried through the press, was published. When things had reached this stage, queries about Fladpick appeared in the literary and professionally inquisitive papers, and answers were given with reference to the editions of Fladpick's book. It began to leak out that he was a young Englishman, who had lived all his life in

Tartary, and that his book had been published by a local firm, and enjoyed no inconsiderable reputation among the English Tartars there, but that the copies which had found their way to England were extremely scarce, and had come into the hands only of a few *cognoscenti*, who, being such, were enabled to create for him the reputation he so thoroughly deserved. The next step in the campaign was to contradict this; and the press teemed with biographies and counter-biographies. Dazzler also wired numerous interviews, but an authoritative statement was inserted in the *Acadæum*, signed by Andrew Mackay, stating that they were unfounded, and paragraphs began to appear detailing how Fladpick spent his life in dodging the interviewers. Anecdotes of Fladpick were highly valued by editors of newspapers, and very plenteous they were, for Fladpick was known to be a cosmopolitan, always sailing from pole to pole, and caring little for residence in the country of which he yet bade fair to be the Laureate. These anecdotes girdled the globe even more quickly than their hero, and they returned from foreign parts bronzed and almost unrecognisable, to set out immediately on fresh journeys in their new guise. A parody of one of his plays was inserted in a comic paper, and it was bruited abroad that Andrew Mackay was collaborating with him in preparing one of his dramas for representation at the Independent Theatre.

This set the older critics by the ears, and they protested vehemently in their theatrical columns against the infamous ethics propagated by the new writer, quoting largely from the specimens of his work given in Mackay's article in the *Fortnightly Contemporary*. Patrick, who wrote the dramatic criticism for seven papers, led the attack upon the audacious iconoclast. Journalesia was convulsed by the quarrel, and even young ladies asked their partners in the giddy waltz whether they were Fladpickites or Anti-Fladpickites. You could never be certain of escaping Fladpick at dinner, for the lady you took down was apt to take you down by her contempt for your ignorance of Fladpick's awfully sweet writings. Any amount of people promised one another introductions to Fladpick, and those who had met him enjoyed quite a reflected reputation in Belgravian circles. As to the Fladpicknic parties, which brother-genuises like Dick Jones and Harry Robinson gave to the great writer, it was next to impossible to secure an invitation to them, and comparatively few boasted of the privilege. Fladpick reaped a good deal of kudos from refusing to be lionised, and preferring the society of men of letters like himself, during his rare halting moments in England. Long before this stage, Mackay had seen his way to introducing the catch-word of the conspiracy, "the English Shakespeare." He defended vehemently the ethics of the great writer, saying they were at core essentially at one with those of the great nation from whence he sprang, and whose very life-blood had passed into his work. This brought about a reaction, and all over the country the scribblers hastened to do justice to the maligned writer, and an elaborate analysis of his most subtle characters was announced as having been undertaken by Mr. Patrick Boyle. And when it was stated that he was to be included in the Contemporary Men of Letters Series, the advance orders for the work were far in advance of the demand for Fladpick's actual writings. "Shakespearean," "the English Shakespeare," was now constantly used in connection with his work, and even the most hard-worked reviewers promised themselves to skim his book in their next summer holiday. About this time, too, Dazzler unconsciously helped the Society, by announcing that Fladpick was dying of consumption in a snow-hut in Greenland, and it was felt that he must either die or go to a warmer climate, if not both. The news of his phthisic weakness put the seal upon his genius, and the great heart of the nation went out to him in his lonely snow-hut, but returned on learning that the report was a *canard*. Still, the danger he had passed through endeared him to his country, and within a few months, Fladpick, the English Shakespeare, was definitely added to the glories of the national literature, founding a whole school of writers in his own country, attracting considerable attention on the Continent, and being universally regarded as the centre of the Victorian Renaissance.

But this was the final stage. A little before it was reached, Cecilia came to Frank Grey to pour her latest trouble into his ear, for she had carefully kept her promise of bothering him with her most intimate details, and the love-sick young lawyer had listened to her petty psychology with a patience which would have brought him in considerable fees if invested in the usual way. But this time the worry was genuine.

"Frank," she said, "I am in love."

The sword of Damocles had fallen at last, sundering them for ever.

"With whom?" he gasped.

"With Mr. Fladpick!"

"'The English Shakespeare!'"

"The same."

"But you have never seen him?"

"I have seen his soul. I have divined him from his writings. I have studied Andrew Mackay's essays on him. I feel that he and I are in *rapport*."

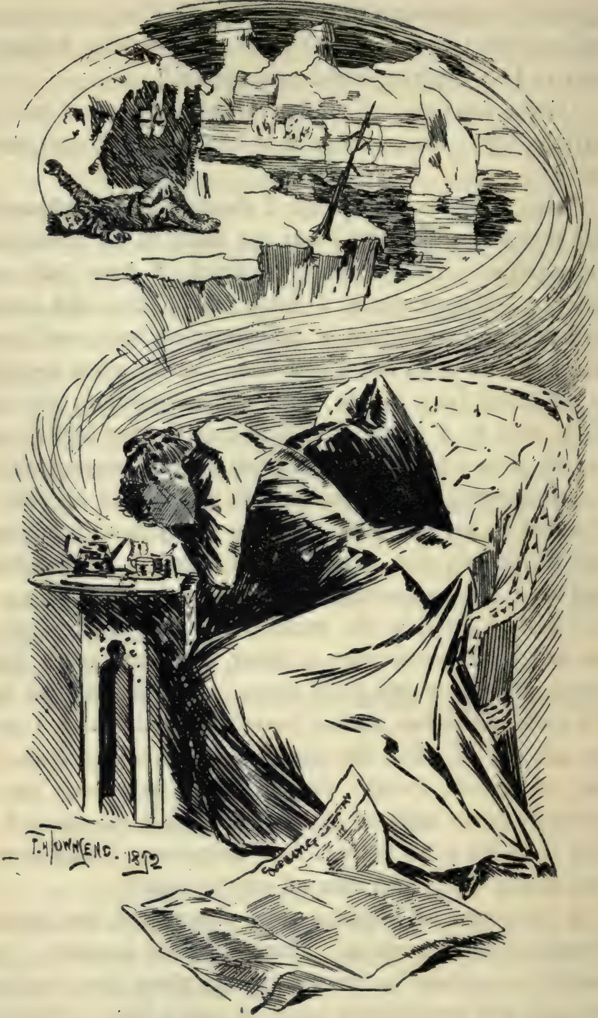
"But this is madness."

"I know it is. I have tried to fight against it. I have applied for admission to the Old Maids' Club, so as to stifle my hopeless passion. Once I have joined Miss Dulcimer's Society I shall perhaps find peace again."

"Great heavens! Think! Think before you take this terrible step. Are you sure it is love you feel, not admiration?"

"No; it is love. At first I thought it was admiration, and probably it was, for I was not likely to be mistaken in the analysis of my feelings, in which I have had much practice. But gradually I felt it efflorescing and sending forth tender shoots, clad in delicate green buds, and a sweet wonder came upon me, and I knew that love was struggling to get itself born in my soul. Then suddenly the news came that he I loved was ill, dying in that lonely snow-hut in grim Greenland, and then, in the tempest of grief that shook me, I knew that my life was bound up with his. Watered by my hot tears, the love in my heart bourgeoned and blossomed like some strange tropical passion-flower, and when the reassuring message that he was strong and well flashed through the world, I felt that if he lived not for me the universe were a blank, and next year's daisies would grow over my early grave." She burst into tears. "A great writer has always been the ideal which I would not tell you of. It is the one thing I have kept from you. But, O Frank! Frank! he can never be mine. He will probably never know of my existence, and the most I can ever hope for is his autograph. To-morrow I shall join the Old Maids' Club, and then all will be over."

A paroxysm of hopeless sobs punctuated her remarks. It was a terrible position. Frank groaned inwardly. How was he to explain to this fair young thing that she loved nobody, and could never hope to marry him? There was no doubt that, with her intense nature and her dreamy blue



"HE I LOVED WAS DYING IN GREENLAND."

eyes, she would pine away and die. Or worse, she would live to be an Old Maid. He made an effort to laugh it off.

"Tush!" he said, "all this is mere imagination. I don't believe you really love anybody."

"Frank!" She drew herself up, stony and rigid, the warm tears on her poor white face frozen to ice. "Have you nothing better than this to say to me, after I have shown you my inmost soul?"

The wretched young lawyer's face returned from white to red. He could have faced a football team in open combat, but these complex psychical positions were beyond the healthy young Philistine.

"For—orgive me," he stammered. "I—I—am—— I—that is to say——Fladpick. Oh, how can I explain what I mean?"

Cecilia sobbed on. Every sob seemed to stick in Frank's own throat. His impotence maddened him. Was he to let the woman he loved fret herself to death for a shadow? And yet to undeceive her were scarcely less fatal. He could have cut out the tongue that first invented Fladpick. Verily, his sin was finding him out.

"Why can you not explain what you mean?" wept Cecilia.

"Because I—oh, hang it all!—because I am the cause of your grief."

"You?" she said. A strange wonderful look came into her eyes. The thought shot from her eyes to his and dazzled them.

Yes! Why not? Why should he not sacrifice himself to save this delicate creature from a premature tomb? Why should he not become "the English Shakespeare"? True, it was a heavy burden to sustain, but what will a man not dare or suffer for the woman he loves? Moreover, was he not responsible for Fladpick's being, and thus, like another Frankenstein, for all the evil done by him. He had employed Fladpick for his own amusement, and the Employers' Liability Act was heavy upon him. The path of abnegation, of duty, was clear. He saw it, and he went for it then and there,—went, like a brave young Englishman, to meet his marriage!

"Yes, I," he said. "I am glad you love Fladpick."

"Why?" she murmured breathlessly.

"Because I love you."

"But—I—do—not—love—you," she said slowly.

"You will, when I tell you it is I who have provoked your love."

"Frank, is this true?"

"On my word of honour as an Englishman."

"You are Fladpick?"

"If I am not, he does not exist. There is no such person."

"Oh, Frank, this is no cruel jest?"

"Cecilia, it is the sacred truth. Fladpick is nobody, if he is not Frank Grey."

"But you never lived in Tartary?"

"Of course not. All that about Fladpick is the veriest poetry. But I did not mind it, for nobody suspected me. I'll introduce you to Andrew Mackay himself, and you shall hear from his own lips how the newspapers have lied about Fladpick."

"My noble, modest boy! So this was why you were so embarrassed before! But why not have told me that you were Fladpick?"

"Because I wanted you to love me for myself alone."

She fell into his arms.

"Frank—Frank—Fladpick, my own, my English Shakespeare," she sobbed ecstatically.

At the next meeting of the Mutual Depreciation Society, a bombshell, in a stamped envelope, was handed to Mr. Andrew Mackay. He tore open the envelope, and the explosion followed—as follows:—

"GENTLEMEN,—I hereby beg to tender the resignation of my membership in your valued Society, as well as to anticipate your objections to my retaining the post of legal adviser I have the honour to hold. I am about to marry. The cynic will say I am laying the foundation of a Mutual Depreciation Society of my own. But this is not the reason of my retirement. That is to be sought in my having accepted the position of 'the English Shakespeare' which you were good enough to open up for me. It would be a pity to let the pedestal stand empty. From the various excerpts you were kind enough to invent—especially from the copious extracts in Mr. Mackay's articles—I have been able to piece together a considerable body of poetic work, and by carefully collecting every existing fragment, and studying the most authoritative expositions of my aims and methods, I have constructed several dramas, much as Professor Owen reconstructed the mastodon from the bones that were extant. As you know, I had never written a line in my life before, but, by the copious aid of your excellent and genuinely helpful criticism, I was enabled to get along without much difficulty. I find that to write blank verse you have only to invert the order of the words, and to keep on your guard against rhyme. You may be interested to know that the last line in the last tragedy is:

Coffined in English yew, he sleeps in peace.

When written, I got my dramas privately printed with a

Tartary trade-mark, after which I smudged the book, and sold the copyright to Makemillion & Co. for ten thousand pounds. Needless to say, I shall never write another book. In taking leave of you, I cannot help feeling that, if I owe you some gratitude for the lofty pinnacle to which you have raised me, you are also not unindebted to me for finally removing the shadow of apprehension that must have haunted you in your sober moments,—I mean, the fear of being found out. Mr. Andrew Mackay, in particular, as the most deeply committed, I feel owes me what he can never hope to repay, for my gallantry in filling the mantle designed by him, whose emptiness might one day have been exposed, to his immediate downfall.—I am, gentlemen, your most sincere and humble depreciator,

'THE ENGLISH SHAKESPEARE.'"

CHAPTER XIV

THE OLD YOUNG WOMAN AND THE NEW

"PROVIDENCE has granted what I dared not hope for," wrote Cecilia to the President.

"If she had hoped for it, Providence would not have granted it," interpolated the Honorary Trier.

"This is hardly the moment for jesting," said Lillie, with marked pique.

"Pardon me. The moment for jesting is surely when you have received a blow. In a happy crisis jesting is a waste of good jokes. The retiring candidate does not state *what* Providence has granted, does she?"

"No," said Lillie savagely. "She was extremely reticent about her history—reticent almost to the point of indiscretion. But I daresay it's a husband."

"Oh, then it can hardly be Providence that has granted it," said Silverdale.

"Providence is not always kindly," said Lillie, laughing. The gibe at Benedicts restored her good humour, and when the millionaire strolled into the Club she did not immediately expel him.

"Well, Lillie," he said, "when are you going to give the *soirée* to celebrate the foundation of the Club? I am staying in town expressly for it."

"As soon as possible, father. I am only waiting for some more members."

"Why, have you any difficulty about getting enough? I seem always to be meeting young ladies on the staircases."

"We are so exclusive."

"So it seems. You exclude even me," grumbled the millionaire. "I can't make out why you are so hard to please. A more desirable lot of young ladies I never wish to see. I should never have believed it possible that such a number of pretty girls would be anxious to remain single, merely for the sake of a principle."

"You see!" said Lillie eagerly. "We shall be a standing proof to men of how little they have understood our sex."

"Men do not need any proof of that," remarked Lord Silverdale dryly.

This time it was Lillie whom Turple the Magnificent prevented from making the retort which was not on the tip of her tongue.

"A gentleman who gives his name as a lady is waiting in the ante-room," he announced.

They all stared hard at Turple the Magnificent, almost tempted to believe he was joking, and that the end of the world was at hand.

But the countenance of Turple the Magnificent was as stolid and expressionless as a Bath bun. He might have been beaming behind his face, possibly even the Old Maids' Club tickled him vastly, so that his mental midriff was agitated convulsively; but this could not be known by outsiders.

Lillie took the card he tendered her, and read aloud:

"'Nelly Nimrod.'"

"Nelly Nimrod!" cried the Honorary Trier; "Why, that's the famous girl who travelled from Charing Cross to China-Tartary on an elephant, and wrote a book about it under the name of 'Wee Winnie.'"

"Shall I show him in?" interposed Turple the Magnificent.

"Certainly," said Lillie eagerly. "Father, you must go."

"Oh no! Not if it's only a gentleman."

"It may be only no lady," murmured Silverdale.

Lillie caught the words, and turned upon him the dusky splendours of her fulminant eyes.

"*Et tu Brute!*" she said. "Do you, too, hold that false theory that womanliness consists in childishness?"

"No; nor that other false theory that it consists in manliness," retorted the Honorary Trier.

The entry of Nelly Nimrod put an end to the dispute. In the excitement of the moment no one noticed that the millionaire was still leaning against an epigram.

"Good morning, Miss Dulcimer, I am charmed to make your acquaintance," said Wee Winnie, gripping the President's soft hand with painful cordiality. She was elegantly attired in a white double-breasted waistcoat, a Zouave jacket, a check-tweed skirt, gaiters, a three-inch collar, a tri-corner hat, a pair of tanned gloves, and an eyeglass. In her hand she carried an ebony stick. Her hair was parted at the side. Nelly was nothing if not original, so that when the spectator looked down for the divided skirt he was astonished not to find it. Wee Winnie, in fact, considered it ungraceful, and *divide et impera* a contradiction in terms. She was a tall girl, and looked handsome even under the most masculine conditions.

"I am happy to make yours," returned the President. "Is it to join the Old Maids' Club that you have called?"

"It is. Wherever there is a crusade, you will always find me in the van. I don't precisely know your objects yet, but any woman who strikes out anything new commands my warmest sympathies."

"Be seated, Miss Nimrod. Allow me to introduce Lord Silverdale, an old friend of mine."

"And of mine," replied Nelly, bowing, with a sweet smile.

"Indeed?" cried Lillie, flushing.

"In the spirit, only in the spirit," said Nelly. "His lordship's *Poems of Passion* formed my sole reading in the deserts of China-Tartary."

"In the letter, you should say, then," said the peer. "By the way, you are confusing me with a minor poet—Silverplume—and his book is not called *Poems of Passion*, but *Poems of* Com*passion*."

"Oh, well, there isn't much difference," said Nelly.

"No; according to the proverb, Compassion *is* akin to Passion," admitted Silverdale.

"Well, Miss Nimrod," put in Lillie, "our object is easily defined. We are an association of young and beautiful girls devoted to celibacy, in order to modify the meaning of the term 'old maid.'"

Nelly Nimrod started up enthusiastically. "Bravo, old girl!" she cried, slapping the President on the back. "Put me down for a flag. I catch the conception of the campaign. It is magnificent."

"But it is not war," said Lillie deprecatingly. "Our methods are peaceful, unaggressive. Our platform is merely metaphorical. Our lesson is the self-sufficiency of spinsterhood. We preach it by existing."

"Not exist by preaching it," added Silverdale. "This is not one of the cliques of the shrieking sisterhood."

"What do you mean by the term shrieking sisterhood?" said Nelly indignantly. "I use it to denote the mice-fearing classes."

"Hear, hear," said Lillie. "Miss Nimrod, it is true that our members are required not to exhibit in public, but only because that is a part of the old unhappy signification of 'old maid.'"

"I quite understand. You would not call a book a public exhibition of one's self, I suppose?"

"Certainly not; if it is an autobiography," said Silverdale.

"That's all right, then. My book *is* autobiographical."

"I knew a celebrity once," said Silverdale, "a dreadfully shy person. All his life he lived retired from the world, and even after his death he concealed himself behind an autobiography."

Lillie frowned at these ironical insinuations, though Miss Nimrod appeared impervious to them.

"I have not concealed myself," she said simply. "All I thought and did is written in my book."

"I liked that part about the flea," murmured the millionaire.

"What's that? I didn't catch that," said Nelly, looking round in the direction of the voice.

"Good gracious, father, haven't you gone?" cried Lillie, no less startled. "It's too bad. You are spoiling one of my best epigrams. Couldn't you lean against something else?"

Before the millionaire could be got rid of, Turple the Magnificent re-appeared.

"A lady who gives the name of a gentleman," he said.

The assemblage pricked up its ears.

"What name?" asked Lillie.

"Miss Jack, she said."

"That's her surname," said Lillie, in a disappointed tone.

Turple the Magnificent stood reproved a moment, then he went out to fetch the lady. The gathering was already so large that Lillie thought there was nothing to be gained by keeping her waiting.

Miss Jack proved to be an extremely eligible candidate, so far as appearances went. She bowed stiffly on being introduced to Miss Nimrod.

"May I ask if that is to be the uniform of the Old Maids' Club?" she inquired of the President. "Because if so, I am afraid I have made a mistaken journey. It is as a protest against unconventional females that I designed to join you."

"Is it to me you are referring as an unconventional female?" asked Miss Nimrod, bridling up.

"Certainly," replied Miss Jack, with exquisite politeness. "I lay stress upon your sex, merely because it is not obvious."

"Well, I *am* an unconventional female, and I glory in it," said Nelly Nimrod, seating herself astride the sofa. "I did not expect to hear the provincial suburban note struck within these walls. I claim the right of every woman to lead her own life in her own toilettes."

"And a pretty life you have led!"

"I have, indeed!" cried Miss Nimrod, goaded almost to oratory by Miss Jack's taunts. "Not the ugly, unlovely life of the average woman. I have exhausted all the sensations which are the common guerdon of youth and health and high spirits, and which have, for the most part, been selfishly monopolised by man. The splendid audacity of youth has burnt in my veins, and fired me to burst my

"IS THAT THE UNIFORM OF THE OLD MAIDS' CLUB?"

swaddling clothes and strike for the emancipation of my sex. I have not merely played cricket in a white shirt and lawn tennis in a blue serge skirt, I have not only skated in low-heeled boots and fenced in black knee-breeches, but I have sailed the seas in an oil-skin jacket and a sou'-wester, and swum them in nothing, and walked beneath them in the diver's mail. I have waded after salmon in long boots, and caught trout in tweed knickerbockers and spats. Nay more! I have proclaimed the dignity of womanhood upon the moors, and shot grouse in brown leather gaiters and a sweet Norfolk jacket with half-inch tucks. But this is not the climax. I have——"

"Yes, I know. You are Wee Winnie. You travelled alone from Charing-Cross to China-Tartary. I have not read your book, but I have heard of it."

"And what have you heard of it?"

"That it is in bad taste."

"Your remark is in worse," interposed Lillie severely.

"Ladies, ladies," murmured Silverdale. "This is the first time we have had two of them in the room together," he thought. "I suppose, when the thing is once started, we shall change the name to the Kilkenny Cats' Club."

"In bad taste, is it?" said Miss Nimrod, promptly whipping a book out of her skirt pocket. "Well, here is the book—if you can find one passage in bad taste, I'll—I'll delete it in the next edition. There!"

She pushed the book into the hands of Miss Jack, who took it rather reluctantly.

"What's this?" asked Miss Jack, pointing to a weird illustration.

"That's a picture of me on my elephant, sketched by myself. Do you mean to say there's any bad taste about that?"

"Oh no; I merely asked for information. I didn't know what animal it was."

"You astonish me," said the artist. "Have you never been to a circus? Yes, this is Mumbo Jumbo himself."

"Surely, Miss Jack," said Lord Silverdale gravely, "you must have heard, if you have not read, how Miss Nimrod chartered an elephant, packed up her kodak and a few bonnet-boxes, and rode him on the curb through Central Asia. But may I ask, Miss Nimrod, why you did not enrich the book with more sketches? There is only this one. All the rest are kodaks."

WEE WINNIE ON HER TRAVELS.

"Well, you see, Lord Silverdale, it's simpler to photograph."

"Perhaps. But your readers miss the artistic quality that pervades this sketch. I am glad you made an exception in its favour."

"Oh, only because one can't kodak one's self. Everything else I caught as I flew past."

"Ah. Did you catch many Tartars?"

"Hundreds. I destroyed most of them."

"By the way, you did not come across Mr. Fladpick in Tartary?"

"'The English Shakespeare'? Oh yes! I lunched with him. He is charm——"

"Ah, here is the flea!" interrupted Miss Jack.

The millionaire started as if he had been stung.

"I won't have it taken apart from the context, I warn you—that wouldn't be fair," said Miss Nimrod.

"Very well, I will read the whole passage," said Miss Jack. "'Mumbo Jumbo bucked violently (*see Illustration*), but I settled myself tightly on the saddle, and gave myself up to meditations on the vanity of life-guardsmen. Mumbo Jumbo seemed, however, determined to have his fling, and bounded about with the agility of an indiarubber ball. At last his convulsions became so terrific, that I grew quite nervous about my fragile bonnet-boxes. They might easily dash one another to bits. I determined to have leather hat-boxes the next time I travelled in untrodden paths. "Steady, my beauty, steady," I cried. Recognising my familiar accents, my pet eased a little. To pacify him entirely, I whistled "Ba, ba, ba, boodle-dee" to him, but his contortions recommenced, and became quite grotesque. First he lifted one paw high in the air, then he twirled his trunk round the corner, then the first paw came down with a thud that shook the desert, while the other three paws flew up towards the sky. It suddenly occurred to me that he was dancing to the air of "Ba, ba, ba, boodle-dee," and I laughed so loud and long that any stray Mahatma, who happened to be smoking at the door of his cave in the cool of the evening, must have thought me mad. But while I was laughing, Mumbo Jumbo continued to stand upon his tail, so that I saw it could not be "Ba, ba, ba, boodle-dee" he was suffering from. I wondered whether perhaps he could be teething—or should I say, tusking! I do not know whether elephants get a second set, or whether they cut their wisdom tusks, but as they are so sagacious I suppose they do. Suddenly the consciousness of what was really the matter with him flashed sharply upon my brain.

I looked down upon my hand, and there, poised lightly yet firmly, like a butterfly upon a lily, was a giant flea. Instantly, without uttering a single cry or reeling in my saddle, I grasped the situation, and, coolly seizing the noxious insect with my other hand, I choked the life out of him, while Mumbo Jumbo cantered along in restored calm. The sensitive beast had evidently been suffering untold agonies.'"

"Now, Lord Silverdale," said Miss Nimrod, "I appeal to you. Is there anything in that passage in the least calculated to bring a blush to the cheek of the young person?"

"No, there is not," said his lordship emphatically. "Only I wish you had caught that flea with your kodak."

"Why?" said Miss Nimrod.

"Because I have always longed to see him. A flea that could penetrate the pachydermatous hide of an elephant must have been indeed a monster. In England we only see that sort under microscopes. They seem to thrive nowhere else. Yours must have been one that had escaped from under the lens. He was magnified three thousand diameters, and he never recovered from it. You probably took him over in your trunk."

"Oh no, I'm sure I didn't," protested Miss Nimrod.

"Well, then, Mumbo Jumbo did in his."

"Excuse me," interposed Miss Jack. "We are getting off the point. I did not say the passage was calculated to raise a blush. I said it was a grave error of taste."

"It is a mere flea-bite," broke in the millionaire impatiently. "I liked it when I first read it, and I like it now I hear it again. It is a touch of nature that brings the Tartary traveller home to every fireside."

"Besides," added Lord Silverdale. "The introduction of the butterfly and the lily makes it quite poetical."

"Ladies and gentlemen," interposed the President at last, "we are not here to discuss entomology or æsthetics. You stated, Miss Jack, that you thought of joining us as a protest against female unconventionality."

"I said unconventional females," persisted Miss Jack.

"Even so I do not follow you," said Lillie.

"It is extremely simple. I am unable to marry because I have a frank nature, not given to feigning or fawning. I cannot bring a husband what he expects now-a-days in a wife."

"What is that?" inquired Lillie curiously.

"A chum," answered Miss Jack. "Formerly a man wanted a wife—now he wants a woman to sympathise with his intellectual interests, to talk with him intelligently about his business, discuss politics with him—nay, almost to smoke with him. Tobacco for two is destined to be the ideal of the immediate future. The girls he favours are those who flatter him by imitating him. It is women like Wee Winnie who have depraved his taste. There is nothing the natural man craves less for than a clever learned wife. Only he has been talked over into believing that he needs intellectual companionship, and now he won't be happy till he gets it. I have escaped politics and affairs all my life, and I am determined not to marry into them."

"What a humiliating confession!" sneered Miss Nimrod. "It's a pity you don't wear doll's clothes."

"I claim for every woman the right to live her own life in her own toilette," returned Miss Jack. "The sneers about dolls are threadbare. I have watched these intellectual *camaraderies*, and I say they are a worse injustice to woman than any you decry."

"That sounds a promising paradox," muttered Lord Silverdale.

"The man expects the woman to talk politics—but he refuses to take a reciprocal interest in the woman's sphere of work. He will not talk nursery or servants. He will preach economy, but he will not talk it."

"That is true," said Lillie, impressed. "What reply would you make to that, Miss Nimrod?"

"There is no possible reply," said Miss Jack hurriedly. "So much for the mock equality which is the cant of the new husbandry. How stands the account with the new young womanhood? The young ladies who are clamouring for equality with men want to eat their cake and to have it too. They want to wear masculine hats, yet to keep them on in the presence of gentlemen; to compete with men in the market-place, yet to take their seats inside omnibuses on wet days and outside them on sunny; to be 'pals' with men in theatres and restaurants, and shirk their share of the expenses. I once knew a girl named Miss Friscoe who cultivated Platonic relations with young men, but never once did she pay her half of the hansom."

"Pardon me," interrupted Wee Winnie. "My whole life gives the lie to your superficial sarcasm. In my anxiety to escape these obvious objurgations, I have even, I admit it, gone to the opposite extreme. I have made it a point to do unto men as they would have done unto me, if I had not anticipated them. I always defray the bill at the restaurants, buy the stalls at the box-office, and receive the curses of the cabman. If I see a young gentleman to the train, I always get his ticket for him and help him into the carriage. If I convoy him to a ball, I bring him a button-hole, compliment him upon his costume, and say soft nothings about his moustache; while, if I go to a dance alone, I stroll in about one in the morning, survey mankind through my eye-glass, loll a few minutes in the doorway, then go down-stairs to interview the supper, and, having sated myself with chicken, champagne, and trifle, return to my club.

"To your club?" exclaimed the millionaire.

"Yes—do you think the Old Maids' is the only one in London? Mine is the Lady Travellers'—do you know it, Miss Dulcimer?"

"No—o," said Lillie shamefacedly. "I only know the Writers'!"

"Why, are you a member of that? I'm a member too. It's getting a great club now, what with Ellaline Rand (Andrew Dibdin, you know), and Frank Maddox, and Lillie Dulcimer. Wonder we haven't met there."

"I'm so taken up with my own club," explained Lillie.

"Naturally; but you must come and dine with me some evening at the Lady Travellers'—snug little club—much cosier than the Junior Widows', and they give you a better bottle of wine, and then the decorations are so sweetly pretty. The only advantage the Junior Widows' has over the Lady Travellers' is the lovely smoking-room lined with mirrors, which makes it much nicer when you have men to dinner. I always ask them there."

"Why, are you allowed to have men?" asked Miss Jack.

"Certainly—in the dining and smoking rooms. Then of course there are special gentlemen's nights. We get down a lot of music-hall talent, just to let them have a peep into Bohemia."

"But how can you be a member of the Junior Widows'?" asked the millionaire.

"Oh, I'm not an original member. But when they were in want of funds, they let a lot of married women and girls in, without asking questions."

"I suppose, though, they all look forward to becoming widows in time?" observed Silverdale cheerfully.

"Oh no," replied Miss Nimrod emphatically. "I don't say that if they hadn't let me in, the lovely smoking-room lined with mirrors mightn't have tempted me to marry, so as to qualify myself. But as it is, thank Heaven, I'm an old maid for life. Why should I give up my freedom and the comforts of my club, and saddle myself with a husband, who would want to monopolise my society, and who would be jealous of my bachelor friends and want me to cu them, who would hanker to read my letters, and who would watch my comings and goings, and open my parcels of cosmetics, marked 'confectionery'? Doubtless in the bad old times, which Miss Jack has the ineptitude to regret, marriage was the key to comparative freedom; but in these days, when woman has at last emancipated herself from the thraldom of mothers, it would be the height of folly to replace them by husbands. Will you tell me, Miss Jack, what marriage has to offer to a woman like me?"

"Nothing," replied Miss Jack.

"Aha! You admit it!" cried Miss Nimrod triumphantly. "Why should I embrace a profession to which I feel no call? Marriage has practically nothing to offer any independent woman except a trousseau, wedding presents, and the jealousy of her female friends. But what are these weighed against the cramping of her individuality? Perhaps even children come to fetter her life still more, and she has daughters who grow up to be younger than herself. No, the future lies with the Old Maid—the woman who will retain her youth and her individuality till death, who dies but does not surrender. The ebbing tide is with you, Miss Jack; the flowing tide is with us. The Old Maids' Club will be the keystone of the arch of the civilisation of to-morrow, and Miss Dulcimer's name will go down to posterity linked with——"

"Lord Silverdale's," said the millionaire.

"Father! what are you saying?" murmured Lillie, abashed before her visitors.

"I was reminding Miss Nimrod of the part his lordship has played in the movement. It is not fair posterity should give you all the credit."

"I have done nothing for the Club—nothing," said the peer modestly.

"And I will do the same," said Miss Jack. "I came here under the delusion that I was going to associate myself with a protest against the defeminisation of my sex, with a band of noble women who were resolved never to marry till the good old times were restored, and marriages became true marriages once more. But instead of that I find—Wee Winnie."

"You are, indeed, fortunate beyond your deserts," replied that lady. "You may even hope to encounter a suitable husband some day."

"I do hope," said Miss Jack frankly. "But I will never marry till I meet a thoroughly conventional man."

"There I have the advantage of you," said Miss Nimrod. "I shall never marry till I meet a thoroughly *un*conventional man."

"A thoroughly unconventional man would never want to marry at all," said Lillie.

"Of course not. That is the beauty of the situation. That is the paradox which guarantees my spinsterhood. Well, I've had a charming afternoon, Miss Dulcimer, but I must really run away now. I hate keeping men waiting, and I have an appointment with a couple of friends at the Junior Widows'. Such fun! While riding in the park before lunch, I met Guy Fledgely out for a constitutional with his father, the baronet. I asked Guy to have a chop at the club with me this evening, and what do you think? The baronet coughed and looked at Guy meaningly, and Guy blushed and hummed and hawed and looked sheepish, and at last gave me to understand he never went out to dine

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with a lady unless accompanied by his father. So I had to ask the old man too. Isn't it awful? By the way, Miss Jack, I should be awfully delighted if you would join our party."

"I thank you, Wee Winnie," said Miss Jack disdainfully.

"But think how thoroughly conventional the baronet is! He won't even let his son go out without a *chaperon*."

"That is true," admitted Miss Jack, visibly impressed. "He is about the most conventional man I ever heard of."

"A widower, too," pursued Miss Nimrod, pressing her advantage.

Miss Jack hesitated.

"And he dines seven sharp at the Junior Widows'."

"Ah, then there is no time to lose," said Miss Jack.

They went out arm in arm.

. . . .

"Have you seen Patrick Boyle's poem in the *Playgoers' Review*"? asked Lillie, when the Club was clear.

"You mean the great dramatic critic's? No, I haven't seen it; but I have seen extracts and eulogies in every paper."

"I have it here complete," said Lillie. "It is quite interesting to find there is a heart beneath the critic's waistcoat. Read it aloud. No, you don't want the banjo!"

Lord Silverdale obeyed. The poem was entitled

CRITICUS IN STABULIS (?).

Rallying-point of all playgoers earnest,
  Packed with incongruous types of humanity,
Easily pleased, yet of critics the sternest,
  Crudely ignoring that all things are vanity,
PIT, in thee laughter and tears blend in medley—
  Would I could sit in thy cosy concavity!
No! to the stalls I am drawn, to the deadly
          Centre of gravity.

Florin, or shilling, or sixpence admission,
  Often I've paid in my raw juvenility,
Purchasing Banbury cakes in addition,
  Ginger-beer, too, to my highest ability.
Villains I hissed like a venomous gander,
  Virtue I loved next to cheesecakes or chocolate
Now no atrocity raises my dander,
          No crime can shock o' late.

Then I could dote on a red melodrama,
  Now I demand but limelight on Philosophy,
Learnéd allusions to Buddha and Brahma,
  Science and Faith and a touch of Theosophy
Farces I slate, on Burlesque I am scathing,
  Pantomime shakes for a week my serenity;
Nothing restores my composure but bathing
          Deep in Ibsenity.

Actors were gods to my boyish devotion,
  Actresses angels—in tights and low bodices;
Drowned is that pretty and puerile notion,
  Thrown overboard in the first of my Odysseys.
Syrens may sing submarine fascinations,
  Adult Ulysses remains analytical,
Flat notes recording, or reedy vibrations,
          Tranquilly critical.

Here in the stalls we are stiff as if starch, meant
  Only for shirt-fronts, to faces had mounted up;
Dowagers' wills may be read on their parchment,
  Beautiful busts on your thumbs may be counted up
Girls in the pit are remarkably rosy,
  Each claspt by lover who passes the paper-bag;
Here I can't even, the girls are so prosy,
          One digit taper bag.

Yet could I sit in the pit of the Surrey,
  Munching an orange or spooning with 'Arriet;
Sadly I fear I should be in no hurry
  Backward to drive my existence's chariot.

"Squeezes" are ill compensated by crushes—
Stalls may be dull, but they're jolly luxurious;
Really the way o'er past joys we can gush is
Awfully curious!

Life is a chaos of comic confusion,
Past things alone take a halo harmonious;
So from illusion we wake to illusion,
Each as the rest just as true and erroneous.
Fin de siècle I am, and so be it!
Here's to the problems of sad sociology!
This is my weird,—like a man I must dree it,
Great is chronology!

Even so, once the great drama allured me,
Which we all play on the stage universal;
"Going behind" the "green" curtain has cured me,
All my hope now is 'tis not a *rehearsal*.
Still I've played on; to old men's parts I grew from
Juvenile lead, as I'd risen from small-boy;
So I'll play on till I get my last cue from
Death, the old call-boy.

"Hum, not at all bad," concluded Lord Silverdale. "I wonder who wrote it."

CHAPTER XV

THE MYSTERIOUS ADVERTISER

JUNIOR WIDOWS' CLUB,
Midnight.

"DEAR MISS DULCIMER,—Just a line to tell you what a lovely evening we have had. The baronet seemed greatly taken with Miss Jack, and she with him, and they behaved in a most conventional manner. Guy and I were able to have a real long chat, and he told me all his troubles. It appears that he has just been thrown over by his promised bride, under circumstances of a most peculiar character. I gave him the sympathy he needed, but at the same time thought to myself, Aha! here is another member for the Old Maids' Club. You rely on me—I will build you up a phalanx of Old Maids that shall just swamp the memory ot Hippolyte and her Amazons. I got out of Guy the name and address of the girl who jilted him. I shall call upon Miss Sybil Hotspur the first thing in the morning, and if I do not land her, my name is not—Yours cheerily,

'WEE WINNIE.'"

"This may be awkward," said the Honorary Trier, returning the letter to the President. "Miss Nimrod seems to take her own election for granted."

"And to think that we are anxious for members," added Lillie.

"Well, we ought to have somebody to replace Miss Jack," said Silverdale, with a suspicion of a smile. "But do you propose to accept Wee Winnie?"

"I don't know—she is certainly a remarkable girl. Such originality and individuality! Suppose we let things slide a little."

"Very well; we will not commit ourselves yet by saying anything to Miss Nim——"

"Miss Nimrod," announced Turple the Magnificent.

"Aha! here we are again!" cried Wee Winnie. "How are you, everybody? How is the old gentleman? Isn't he here?"

"He is very well, thank you, but he is not one of us," said Lillie.

"Oh! Well, anyhow, I've got another of us."

"Miss Sybil Hotspur?"

"The same. I found her raging like a volcano."

"What—smoking?" queried Silverdale.

"No, no, she is one of the old sort. She merely fumes," said Wee Winnie, laughing as if she had made a joke. "She was raving against the infidelity of men. Poor Guy! How his ears must have tingled. He has sent her a long explanation, but she laughs it to scorn. I persuaded her to let you see it—it is so quaint."

"Have you it with you?" asked Lillie eagerly. Her appetite for tales of real life was growing by what it fed upon.

"Yes, here is his letter, several quires long. But before you can understand it, you must know how the breach came about."

"Lord Silverdale, pass Miss Nimrod the chocolate creams. Or would you like some lemonade?"

"Lemonade, by all means," replied Wee Winnie, taking up her favourite attitude astride the sofa; "with just a wee drappie of whiskey in it, if you please. I daresay I shall be as dry as a lime-kiln before I've finished the story and read you this letter."

Turple the Magnificent duly attended to Miss Nimrod's wants. Whatever he felt, he made no sign. He was simply Turple the Magnificent.

"One fine day," said Wee Winnie, "or rather, one day that began fine, a merry party made an excursion into the country. Sybil Hotspur and her *fiancé* Guy Fledgely (and of course the baronet) were of the party. After picnicing on the grass, the party broke into twos till tea-time. The baronet was good enough to pair off with an unattached young lady, and so Sybil and Guy were free to wander away into a copse. The sun was very hot, and the young man had not spared the fizz. First he took off his coat to be cooler, then with an afterthought he converted it into a pillow, and went to sleep.

"Meantime Sybil, under the protection of her parasol, steadily perused one of Addiper's early works, chaster in style than in substance, and sneering in exquisitely chiselled epigrams at the weaknesses of his sex. Sybil stole an involuntary glance at Guy—sleeping so peacefully like a babe in the wood, with the squirrels peeping at him trustfully. She felt that Addiper was a jaundiced cynic—that her Guy, at least, would be faithful unto death. At that instant she saw a folded sheet of paper on the ground near Guy's shoulder. It might have slipped from the inner pocket of the coat on which his head was resting, but if it had she could not put it back without disturbing his slumbers. Besides, it might not belong to him at all. She picked up the paper, opened it, and turned pale as death. This is what she read:

"'MANAGER of *Daily Hurrygraph.*—Please insert enclosed series in order named on alternate days, commencing to-day week. Postal order enclosed.'

"'1. Dearest, dearest, dearest,—Remember the grotto.—POPSY.'

"'2. Dearest, dearest, dearest,—This is worse than silence. Sobs are cheap to-day.—POPSY.'

"'3. Dearest, dearest, dearest,—Only Anastasia and the dog. Thought I should have died. Cruel heart hope on. The white band of hope. Watchman, what of the night? Shall we say 11.15 from Paddington, since the sea will not give up its dead? I have drained the dregs. The rest is silence. Answer to-morrow, or I shall dree my weird.—POPSY.'

"There was no signature to the letter, but the writing was that which had hitherto borne to poor Sybil the daily assurances of her lover's devotion. She looked at the sleeping traitor so savagely that he moved uncomfortably even in his sleep. Like a serpent that scrap of paper had entered into her Eden, and she put it in her bosom that it might sting her. Unnoticed, the shadows had been lengthening, the sky had grown grey—as if in harmony with her blighted hopes. Roughly she roused the sleeper, and hastily they wended their way back to the rendezvous, to find tea just over and the rush to the station just beginning. There was no time to talk till they were

"DEAREST IS YOU," HE SAID, WITH A GHASTLY SMILE.

seated face to face in the railway carriage. The party had just caught the train, and, bundling in anyhow, had become separated. Sybil and Guy were alone again.

"Then Sybil plucked from her breast the serpent, and held it up.

"'Guy!' she said, 'what is this?'

"He turned pale. 'W—w—here did you get that from?' he stammered.

"'What is this?' she repeated, and read in unsympathetic accents, 'Dearest, dearest, dearest,—Remember the grotto. —Popsy.'

"'Who is dearest?' she continued.

"'You, of course,' he said, with ghastly playfulness.

"'Indeed? Then allow me to say, sir, I *will* remember the grotto. I shall never forget it, Popsy. If you wish to communicate with me, a penny postage stamp is, I believe, adequate. Perhaps I am also Anastasia? to say nothing of the dog. Or shall we say the 11.15 from Paddington,— Popsy?'

"'Sybil darling,' he broke in piteously, 'give me back that paper; you wouldn't understand.'

"Sybil silently replaced the serpent in her bosom, and leant back haughtily.

"'I can explain all,' he cried wildly.

"'I am listening,' Sybil said.

"'The fact is—I—I——' The young man flushed and stammered. Sybil's pursed lips gave him no assistance.

"'It may seem incredible—you will not believe it.'

"Sybil made no sign.

"'I—I—am the victim of a disease.'

"Sybil stared scornfully.

"'I—I—don't look at me like that, or I can't tell you. I—I—I didn't like to tell you before, but I always knew you would have to know some day. Perhaps it is better it has come out before our marriage. Listen!'

"The young man leant over and breathed solemnly in her ear, *'I suffer from an hereditary tendency to advertise in the Agony Column.'*

"Sybil made no reply. The train drew up at a station. Without a word Sybil left the carriage and rejoined her friends in the next compartment."

"What an extraordinary excuse!" exclaimed Lillie.

"So Sybil thought," replied Wee Winnie. "From that day to this—almost a week—she has never spoken to him. And yet Guy persists in his explanation—even to me, which is so superfluous that I am almost inclined to believe in its truth. At any rate, I will now read you his letter:

. . . .

"DEAR SYBIL,—Perhaps for the last time I address you thus, for if, after reading this, you still refuse to believe me, I shall not trespass upon your patience again. But for the sake of our past love I beg you to read what follows in a trusting spirit—and if not in a trusting spirit, at least to read it. It is the story of how my father became a baronet, and when you know that you will perhaps learn to pity and to bear with me.

"When a young man my father was bitten by the passion for contributing to the Agony Column. Some young men spend their money in one way, some in another; this was my father's dissipation. He loved to insert mysterious words and sentences in the advertisement columns of the newspapers, so as to enjoy the sensation of giving food for speculation to a whole people. To sit quietly at home, and with a stroke of the pen influence the thoughts of millions of his countrymen—this gave my father the keenest satisfaction. When you come to analyse it, what more does the greatest author do? The Agony Column is the royal road to successful authorship, if the publication of fiction in leading newspapers be any test of success; for my father used sometimes to conduct whole romances by correspondence, after the fashion of the then reigning Wilkie Collins. And the Agony Column is also the most innocuous medium for satisfying that craze for supplying topics of conversation which sometimes leads people to crime. I make this analysis to show you that there was no antecedent improbability about what you seem to consider a wild excuse. The desire to contribute to this department of journalism is no isolated psychical freak; it is related to many other manifestations of mental activity, and is perfectly intelligible. But this desire, like every other, may be given its head till it runs away with the whole man. So it was with my father. He began—half in fun—with a small advertisement, one insertion. Unfortunately—or fortunately—he made a little hit with it. He heard two men discussing it in a *café*. The next week he tried again—unsuccessfully this time, so far as he knew. But the third advertisement was again a topic of conversation. Even in his own office (he was training for an architect) he heard the fellows saying, Did you see that funny advertisement this morning:

Be careful not to break the baby?

"You can imagine how intoxicating this sort of thing is, and how the craving for the secret enjoyment it brings may grow on a man. Gradually my father became the victim of a passion fiercer than the gambler's, yet akin to it. For he never knew whether his money would procure him the gratification he yearned for or not; it was all a fluke. The most promising mysteries would attract no attention, and even a carefully planned novelette, that ran for a week with as many as three characters intervening, would fall still-born upon the *tapis* of conversation. But every failure only spurred him to fresh effort. All his spare coin, all his savings, went into the tills of the newspaper cashiers. He cut down his expenses to the uttermost farthing, living abstemiously and dressing almost shabbily, and sacrificing everything to his ambition. It was lucky he was not in a bank; for he had only a moderate income, and who knows to what he might have been driven?

"At last my father struck oil.

"Tired of the unfruitful field of romance, whose best days seemed to be over, my father returned to that rudimentary literature which pleases the widest number of readers, while it has the never-failing charm of the primitive for the jaded disciples of culture. He wrote only polysyllabic unintelligibilities.

"Thus for a whole week, in every morning Agony Column, he published in large capitals the word:

PADDLEPINTOSPHEROSKEDADDEPOID.

"This was an instantaneous success. But it was only a *succès d'estime*. People talked of it, but they could not remember it. It had no seed of permanence in it. It could never be more than a nine days' wonder. It was an artificial, esoteric novelty that might please the cliques, but could never touch the masses. It lacked the simplicity of real greatness, that unmistakeable elemental cachet which commends things to the great heart of the people. After a bit, this dawned upon my father; and, profiting by his experience, he determined to create something which should be immortal.

"For days he racked his brains, unable to please himself. He had the critical fastidiousness of the true artist, and his ideal ever hovered before him, unseizable.

Grotesque words floated about him in abundance; every current of air brought him new suggestions; he lived in a world of strange sounds. But the great combination came not.

"Late one night, as he sat brooding by his dying fire, there came a sudden rapping at his chamber door. A flash of joy illumined his face. He started to his feet.

"'I have it!' he cried.

"'Have what?' said his friend Marple, bursting into the room without further parley.

"'Influenza,' surlily answered my father, for he was not to be caught napping; and Marple went away hurriedly. Marple was something in the City. The two young men were great friends, but there are some things which cannot be told even to friends. It was not influenza my father had got. To his fevered onomatopoetic fancy Marple's quick quadruple rap had translated itself into the word

OLOTUTU.

"At this hour of the day, my dear Sybil, it is superfluous to say anything about this word, with which you have been familiar from your cradle. It has now been before the public over a quarter of a century, and it has long since won immortality. Little did you think when we sat in the railway carriage yesterday, that the 'Olotutu' that glared at you from the partition was the far-away cause of the cloud hanging over our lives. But it may be interesting to you to learn that in the early days many people put the accent on the second syllable, whereas, as all the world now knows, the accent is on the first, and the 'o' of 'ol' is short. When my father found he had set the Thames on fire, he was almost beside himself with joy. At the office, the clerks, in the intervals of wondering about 'Olotutu,' wondered if he had come into a fortune. He determined to follow up his success; to back the winning word; to consecrate his life to 'Olotutu'; to put all his money on it. Thenceforward, for the next three months, you very rarely opened a paper without seeing the word 'Olotutu.' It stood always by itself, self-complete and independent, rigid and austere, in provoking sphinx-like solitude.

"Sybil, imagine to yourself my father's rapture! To be the one man in all England who had the clue to the enigma of 'Olotutu!' At last the burden of his secret became intolerable. He felt he must breathe a hint of it, or die. One night, while Marple was smoking in his rooms, and wondering about 'Olotutu,' my father proudly told him all.

"'Great heavens!' exclaimed Marple. 'Tip us your flipper, old man. You are a millionaire!'

"'A what?' gasped my father.

"'A millionaire!'

"'Are you a lunatic?'

"'Are you an idiot? Don't you see that there is a fortune in "Olotutu?"'

"'A fortune! How?'

"'By bringing it out as a Joint-Stock Company.'

"'But — but you don't understand. "Olotutu" is only'——

"'Only an income for life,' interrupted Marple excitedly. 'Look here, old boy, I'll get you up a syndicate to run it in twenty-four hours.'

"'Do you mean to say——?'

"'I mean to do. I'm an ass not to quietly annex it all to myself; but I always said I was too honest for the City. Give me "Olotutu," and we'll divide the profits. Glory Hooray!'

"He capered about the floor wildly.

"'But what profits? Where from?' asked my father, still unenlightened; for, outside architecture, he was a green-horn.

"Marple sang the 'Ba, ba, ba, boodle-dee' of the day, and continued his wild career.

"My father seized him by the throat, and pushed him into a chair.

"'Speak, man!' he cried agitatedly. 'Stop your tomfoolery, and talk sense.'

"'I am talking cents—which is better,' said Marple with a boisterous burst of laughter. 'A word that all the world is talking about is a gold mine—a real gold mine I mean, not one on a prospectus. Don't you see that "Olotutu" is a household word, and that everybody imagines it is the name of some new patent something which the proprietor has been keeping dark? I did myself. When at last "Olotutu" *is* put upon the market, it will come into the world under the fierce light that beats upon a boom, and it will be snapped up like currant cake at a tea-fight. Why, Nemo's Fruit Pepper, which has been on every hoarding for twenty years, is not half so much talked about as "Olotutu." What you have achieved is an immense preliminary advertisement—and you were calmly thinking of stopping there!—within sight of Pactolus!'

"'I had achieved *my* end,' replied my father, with dignity. 'Art for art's sake—I did not work for money.'

"'Then you refuse half the profits?'

"'Oh no, no! If the artist's work brings him money, he cannot help it. I think I catch your idea now. You wish to put some commodity upon the market attached to the name of "Olotutu." We have a pedestal but no statue, a cloak but nothing to cover.'

"'We shall have plenty to cover soon,' observed Marple, winking. And he sat himself unceremoniously at my writing-desk, and began scribbling away for dear life.

"'I suppose, then,' went on my father, 'we shall have to get hold of some article and manufacture it?'

"'Nonsense,' jerked Marple. 'Where are we to get the capital from?'

"'Oh, I see. You will get the syndicate to do it?'

"'Good gracious, man!' yelped Marple. 'Do you suppose the syndicate will have any capital? Let me write in peace.'

"'But who *is* going to manufacture "Olotutu," then?' persisted my father.

"'The British public, of course,' thundered Marple. My father was silenced. The feverish scratching of Marple's pen continued, working my father up to an indescribable nervous tension.

"'But what will "Olotutu" be?' he inquired at last. 'A patent medicine, a tobacco, a soap, a mine, a tea, a comic paper, a beverage, a tooth powder, a hair restorer?'

"'Look here, old man!' roared Marple. 'How do you expect me to bother about details? This thing has got to be worked at once. The best part of the company season is already over. But "Olotutu" is going to wake it up. Mark my words. The shares of "Olotutu" will be at a premium on the day of issue. Another sheet of paper, quick.'

"'What for?'

"'I want to write to a firm of Chartered Accountants and Valuers to give an estimate of the profits.'

"'An estimate of the profits?'

"'Don't talk like a parrot!'

"'But how can they estimate the profits?'

"'How? What do you suppose they're chartered for? You or I couldn't do it, of course not. But it's the business of accountants. That's what they're for. Pass me more writing-paper—reams of it!'

"Marple spent the whole of that night writing letters to what he called his tame guinea-pigs; and the very next day, large bills, bearing the solitary word 'Olotutu,' were pasted up all over London, till the public curiosity mounted to frenzy. The bill-posters earned many a half-crown by misinforming the inquisitive. Marple worked like a horse. First he drew up the Prospectus, leaving blanks for the Board of Directors of the Company, then he filled up the blanks. It was not easy. One lord was only induced to

THE PUBLIC CURIOSITY MOUNTED TO FRENZY.

serve by Marple's convincing representations of the good 'Olotutu' would do to the masses. When the Board was complete, Marple had still to get the syndicate, from which the Directors were to acquire 'Olotutu,' but he left that till the end, knowing there would be no difficulty there. I have never been able to gather from my father exactly what went on, nor does my father profess to know exactly himself, but he tells with regret how he used to worry Marple daily by inquiring if he had yet decided what 'Olotutu' was to be, as if Marple did not have his hands full enough without that. Marple turned round on him one day, and shrieked, 'That's your affair, not mine. You're selling "Olotutu" to me, aren't you? I can't be buyer and seller too.' This, by the way, does not seem to be so impossible as it sounds, for, according to my father, when the Company came out, Marple bought and sold 'Olotutu' in the most mysterious manner, rigging the market, watering the shares, cornering the bears, and doing other extraordinary things, each and all at a profit. He was not satisfied with his share of the price paid for 'Olotutu' by the syndicate, nor with his share of the enormously higher price paid to the syndicate by the public, but went in for Stock Exchange manœuvres six-deep, coming out an easy winner on Settling Day. One of my father's most treasured collections is the complete set of proofs of the Prospectus. It went through thirteen editions before it reached the public. No author could revise his book more lovingly than Marple revised that Prospectus. What tales printers could tell, to be sure! The most noticeable variations in the text of my father's collection are the omission or addition of ciphers. Some of the editions have £120,000 for the Share Capital of the Company, where others have £1,200,000, and others £12,000. Sometimes the Directors appear to have extenuated 'nought,' sometimes to have set down 'nought' in malice. As for the number of Debenture Shares, the amounts to be paid up on allotment, the contracts with divers obscure individuals, the number of shares to be taken up by the Directors, and the number to be accepted by the Vendors in part payment—these vary indefinitely; but in no edition, not even in those still void of the names of the Directors, do the profits guaranteed by the Directors fall below twenty-five per cent. Sometimes the complex and brain-baffling calculations that fill up page 3 result in a bigger profit, sometimes in a smaller, but they are always cheering to contemplate. There is not very much about 'Olotutu' even in the last edition, but from the very first there is a great deal about the power of the Company to manufacture, import, export, and deal in all kinds of materials, commodities, and articles necessary for and useful in carrying on the same; to carry on any other operations or business which the Company may from time to time deem expedient in connection with its main business for the time being; to purchase, take in exchange, or on lease, hire, or otherwise, in any part of the world, for any estate or interest, any lands, factories, buildings, easements, patent rights, brands, and trademarks, concessions, privileges, machinery, plant, stock-in-trade, utensils, necessary or convenient for the purposes of the Company; or to sell, exchange, let or rent royalty, share of profits, or otherwise use and grant licences, easements, and other rights of and over, and in any other manner deal with or dispose of the whole or any part of the undertaking, business, or property of the Company, and in consideration to accept cash or shares, stock, debenture, and securities of any company, whose objects are or include objects similar to those of the Company.

"The actual nature of 'Olotutu' does not seem to have been settled till the ninth edition, but all the editions include the Analyst's Report, certifying that 'Olotutu' contains no injurious ingredients, and is far purer and safer than any other (here there was a blank in the first eight editions) in the market. From this it is evident that Marple had made up his mind to something chemical, though it is equally apparent that he kept an open mind as regards its precise character, for in the ninth edition the blank is filled up with 'tooth-powder,' in the tenth with 'meat-extract,' in the eleventh with 'hair-dye,' in the twelfth with 'cod-liver oil,' and it is only in the thirteenth edition that the final decision seems to have been arrived at in favour of 'soap.' This, of course, my dear Sybil, you already know. Indeed, if I mistake not, 'Olotutu, the only absolutely scentless soap in the market,' is your own pet soap. I hope it will not shock you too much if I tell you in the strictest confidence that, except in price, stamp, and copious paper-wrapping, 'Olotutu' is simply bars of yellow soap chopped small. It was here, perhaps, that Marple's genius showed to the highest advantage. The public was overdone with patent scented soaps; there seemed something unhealthy or at least molly-coddling about their use; the time was ripe for a return to the rude and the primitive. 'Absolutely scentless' became the trade-mark of 'Olotutu,' and the public, being absolutely senseless (*pace* my dear Sybil), somehow concluded that because the soap was devoid of scent it was impregnated with sanitation.

"Is there need to prolong the story? My father, so unexpectedly enriched, abandoned architecture, and married almost immediately. Soon he became the idol of a popular constituency, and, voting steadily with his party, was made a baronet. I was born a few months after the first dividend was announced. It was a dividend of thirty-three per cent.;

for 'Olotutu' had become an indispensable adjunct to every toilet-table, and the financial papers published leaders boasting of having put their clients up to a good thing, and 'Olotutu' was on everybody's tongue and got into everybody's eyes.

"'Can you wonder, then, that I was born with a congenital craving for springing mysteries upon the public? can you still disbelieve that I suffer from a hereditary tendency to advertise in the Agony Column?

"At periodic intervals an irresistible prompting to force uncouth words upon the universal consciousness seizes me; at other times I am driven to beguile the public with pseudo-sensational communications to imaginary personages. It was fortunate my father early discovered my *penchant*, and told me the story of his life, for I think the very knowledge that I am the victim of heredity helps me to defy my own instincts. No man likes to feel he is the shuttlecock of blind forces. Still they are occasionally too strong for me, and my present attack has been unusually severe and protracted. I have been passing through my father's early phases, and conducting romances by correspondence. Complementary to the series of messages signed Popsy, I had prepared a series signed Wopsy, to go in on alternate days; and if you had only continued your search in my coat-pocket, you would have discovered these proofs of my innocence. May I trust it is now re-established, and that 'Olotutu' has washed away the apparent stain on my character? With anxious heart I await your reply.—Ever yours devotedly, GUY.

. . . .

"Sybil's reply was:

"'I have read your letter. Do not write to me again!'

"She was so set against him," concluded Miss Nimrod, "she would not even write this, but wired it."

"Then she does not believe the story of how Guy Fledgely's father became a baronet?" said Lord Silverdale.

"She does not. She says 'Olotutu' won't wash stains."

"Well, I suppose you will be bringing her up?" said the President.

"I shall—in the way she should go," answered Wee Winnie. "To-day is Saturday; I will bring her on Monday. Meantime, as it is getting very late, and as I have finished my lemonade, I will bid you good afternoon—Have you used 'Olotutu'?"

And with this facetious inquiry Miss Nimrod twirled her stick, and was off.

An hour later Lillie received a wire from Wee Winnie:

"Olotutu. Wretches just reconciled. Letter follows."

And this was the letter that came by the first post on Monday:

"My poor President, — We have lost Sybil. She takes in the *Hurrygraph*, and reads the Agony Column religiously. So all the week she has been exposed to a terrible bombardment.

"As thus:

"*Tuesday.*—'My lost Darling,—A thousand demons are knocking at my door. Say you forgive me, or I will let them in.—Bobo.'

"Or thus:

"*Wednesday.*—'My lost Darling,—You are making a terrible mistake. I am innocent. I am writing this on my bended knees. The fathers have eaten a sour grape. Misericordia.—Bobo.'

"The bitter cry of the outcast lover increased daily, till on *Saturday* it became delirious:

"'My lost Darling,—Save, oh save! I have opened the door. They are there — in their thousands. The children's teeth are set on edge. The grave is dug. Betwixt two worlds I fall to the ground. Adieu for ever! —Bobo.'

"Will you believe that the poor little fool thought all this was meant for her, and that, in consequence, she thawed day by day, till on Saturday she melted entirely and gushed on Guy's shoulder? Guy admitted that he had inserted these advertisements, but he did not tell her (as he afterwards told me in confidence, and as I now tell you in confidence) that they had been sent in *before* the quarrel occurred, and constituted his Agony Column romance for the week—the Popsy-Wopsy romance not being intended for publication till next week. He had concocted these cries of despairing passion without the least idea that they would so nearly cover his own case. But he says that, as his hereditary craze got him into the scrape, it was only fair his hereditary craze should get him out of it. So that's the end of Sybil Hotspur. But let us not lament her too much. One so frail and fickle was not of the stuff of which Old Maids are made. Courage! Wee Winnie is on the war-path.—Yours affectionately,

Nelly."

CHAPTER XVI

THE CLUB BECOMES POPULAR

The influence of Wee-Winnie-on-the-war-path was soon apparent. On the following Wednesday morning the anteroom of the Club was as crowded with candidates as if

Lillie had advertised for a clerk, with three tongues, at ten pounds a year. Silverdale had gone down to Fleet Street to inquire if anything had been heard of Miss Ellaline Rand's projected paper, and Lillie grappled with the applicants single-handed. Turple the Magnificent was told to usher them into the confessional one by one, but the first two candidates insisted that they were one, and as he could not tell which one, he gave way.

It is said that the shepherd knows every sheep of his flock individually, and that a superintendent can tell one policeman from another. Some music-hall managers even profess to distinguish between one pair of singing sisters and all the other pairs. But even the most trained eye would be puzzled to detect any difference between these two lovely young creatures. They were as like as two peas or two cues, or the two gentlemen who mount and descend together the mirror-lined staircase of a restaurant. Interrogated as to the motives of their would-be renunciation, one of them replied, "My sister and myself are twins. We were born so. When the news was announced to our father, he is reported to have exclaimed, 'What a misfortune!' His sympathy was not misplaced, for from our nursery days upward our perfect resemblance to each other has brought us perpetual annoyance. Do what we would, we could never get mistaken for each other. The pleasing delusion that either of us would be saddled with the misdeeds of the other has got us into scrapes without number. At school we each played all sorts of pranks, making sure the other would be punished for them. Alas! the consequences have always recoiled on the head of the guilty party. We were not even whipped for neglecting each other's lessons. It was always for neglecting our own. But, in spite of the stern refusal of experience to favour us with the usual imbroglio, we always went on hoping that the luck would turn. We read Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, and that confirmed us in our evil courses. When we grew up, it would be hard to say which was the giddier, for each hoped that the other would have to bear the burden of her escapades. You will have gathered from our friskiness that our parents were strict Puritans; but at last they allowed an eligible young curate to visit the house with a view to matrimony. He was too good for us; our parents were as much as we wanted in that line. Unfortunately, in this crisis, unknown to each other, the old temptation seized us. Each felt it a unique chance of trying if the thing wouldn't work. When the other was out of the room, each made love to the unwelcome suitor so as to make him fall in love with her sister. Wretched victims of mendacious farce-writers! The result was that he fell in love with us both!"

She paused a moment, overcome with emotion; then resumed: "He proposed to us both simultaneously, vowed he could not live without us. He exclaimed passionately that he could *not* be happy with either were t'other dear charmer away. He said he was ready to become a Mormon for love of us."

"And what was your reply?" said Lillie anxiously.

The fresh young voices broke out into a duet: "We told him to ask papa."

"We were both so overwhelmed by this catastrophe," pursued the story-teller, "that we vowed, for mutual self-protection against our besetting temptation to fribble at the other's expense, never to let each other out of sight. In the farces all the mistakes happen through the twins being on only one at a time. Thus have we balanced each other's tendencies to indiscretion before it was too late, and saved ourselves from ourselves. This necessity of being always together, imposed on us by our unhappy resemblance, naturally excludes either from marriage."

"HE WAS WILLING TO BECOME A MORMON FOR LOVE OF US."

Lillie was not favourably impressed with these skittish sisters. "I sympathise intensely with the sufferings of either," she said slyly, "in being constrained to the society of the other. But your motives of celibacy are not sufficiently pure, nor have you fulfilled our prime condition; for, even granting that your reply to the eligible young churchman was tantamount to a rejection, it still only amounts to half a rejection each, which is fifty per cent. below our standard."

Lillie rang the bell, Turple the Magnificent ushered the twins out and the next candidate in. She was an ethereal blonde in a simple white frock, and her story was as simple.

"Read this Rondeau," she said. "It will tell you all."

Lillie took the lines. They were headed

THE LOVELY MAY—AN OLD MAID'S PLAINT

The lovely May at last is here,
Long summer days are drawing near,
And nights with cloudless moonshine rich:
In woodlands green, on waters clear,
Soft-couched in fern, or on the mere
Gliding like some white water-witch,
Or lunching in a leafy niche,
I see my sweet-faced sister dear,
The lovely May.

She is engaged—and her career
Is one of skittles, blent with beer,
While I, plain sewing left to stitch,
Can ne'er expect those pleasures which,
At this bright season of the year,
The lovely may.

Lillie looked up interrogatively. "But surely *you* have nothing to complain of in the way of loveliness?" she said.

"No, of course not. *I am* the lovely May. It was my sister who wrote that. She died in June, and I found it among her manuscripts. Remorse set in at the thought of

Maria stitching while I was otherwise engaged. I disengaged myself at once. What's fair for one is fair for all. Women should combine. While there's one woman who can't get a husband, no man should be allowed to get a wife."

"Hear, hear!" cried Lillie enthusiastically. "Only I am afraid there will be always blacklegs among us who will betray their sex for the sake of a husband."

"Alas yes," agreed the lovely May. "I fear such was the nature of my sister Maria. She coveted even my first husband."

"What!" gasped the President. "Are you a widow?"

"Certainly! I left off black when I was engaged again, and when I was disengaged I dared not resume it for fear of seeming to mourn my *fiancé*."

"We cannot have widows in the Old Maids' Club," said Lillie regretfully.

"Then I shall start a new Widows' Club, and Old Maids shall have no place in it." And the lovely May sailed out, all smiles and tears.

The next was a most divinely tall and most divinely fair brunette with a brooding morbid expression. Candidate gave the name of Miss Summerson.

Being invited to make a statement, she said:

"I have abandoned the idea of marrying. I have no money. Ergo, I cannot afford to marry a poor man. And I am resolved never to marry a rich one. I want to be loved for myself, not for my want of money. You may stare, but I know what I am talking about. What other attractions have I? Good looks? Plenty of girls with money have that, who would be glad to marry the men I have rejected. In the town I came from I lived with my cousin, who was an heiress. She was far lovelier than I. Yet all the moneyed men were at my feet. They were afraid of being suspected of fortune-hunting, and anxious to vindicate their elevation of character. Why should I marry to gratify a man's vanity, his cravings after cheap quixotism?"

"Your attitude on the great question of the age does you infinite credit, but as you have no banking account to put it to, you traverse the regulation requiring a property qualification," said the President.

"Is there no way over the difficulty?"

"I fear not; unless you marry a rich man, and that disqualifies you under another rule."

So Miss Summerson passed sadly into the outer darkness, to be replaced by a young lady who gave the name of Nell Lightfoot. She wore a charming hat, and a smile like the spreading of sunshine over a crystal pool.

"I met a young Scotchman," she said, "at a New Year's dance, and we were favourably impressed with each other. On the fourteenth of the following February, I received from him a Valentine containing a proposal of marriage and a revelation of the degradation of masculine nature. It would seem he had two strings to his bow—the other being a rich widow whom he had met in a Devonshire lane. Being a Scotchman, he had, for economy's sake, composed a Valentine which, with a few slight alterations, would do for both of us. Unfortunately for himself he sent me the original draft by mistake, and here is his

VERACIOUS VALENTINE

Though the weather is snowy and dreary,
  And a shiver careers down my spine,
Yet the heart in my bosom is cheery,
  For I feel I've exchanged mine for thine.
Do not call it delusion, my dearie,
  But become my own loved valentine.

For that { stormy June day you } remember,
{ New Year's dance you must }
When we { sheltered together from rain,
{ waltzed to a languorous strain,
While the sky, like the fifth of November, }
And our souls glowed despite 'twas December }
Gleamed with lightning outrivalling P } ain.
With a burning but glorious p }
Ah me! In my fire's dying ember
I can see that { dank Devonshire lane.
{ bright ball-room again.

And } I spoke { of the love that I } bore you,
Yet } { not then, fearing to }
And of how for a widow I } yearned,
Though for maidenly love my heart }
Not a schoolgirl { , and fealty I swore you,
{ I'd gazed on before you,
And you listened till sunshine re- } turned,
Had my heart with such sweet madness }
Then { you } parted { from me who } adore you,
{ we } { but still I }
And my heart and umbrella you spurned. }
Though you may not my love have discerned. }

Not repelled by your { hoarded-up } money,
{ having no }
I adore you, my { Belle, } for yourself.
{ Nell, }
You are sweeter than music or honey;
And Dan Cupid's a sensuous elf,
Who is drawn to the fair and the sunny,
And is blind unto nothing but pelf.

Need we feel a less genuine passion
Because we { shall } live in Mayfair?
{ can't }
Love { blooms rich } in the hot-house of fashion,
{ oft fades }

’Tis {an orchid that flourishes there ;
 {a moss-rose that needs the fresh air ;
Yet I would not my own darling lass shun
Were she even as {poor / rich} as she’s {fair. / rare.

There are fools who adore a complexion
That’s like strawberries mingled with cream ; }
As with Nubian blacking a-gleam ; }
A brunette }
But a blonde } is my own predilection,
And the glances from {dark / blue} eyes that beam.
Then refuse not my deathless affection,
Neither shatter my amorous dream.

You’re the very first {woman / maiden} who’s thrilled me
With the passion that tongue cannot tell,
Of none else have I thought since you filled me
With {despair in that Devonshire dell.
 {unrest when the waltz wove its spell.
When your final refusal has killed me,
On my heart will be found graven {Belle. / Nell.

“How strange!” said Lillie. “You combine the disqualifications of two of the previous candidates. You are apparently poor, and you have received only half a proposal.”

A flaming blonde, whose brow was crowned with an aurora of auburn hair, was the next to burst upon the epigrammatic scene. She spoke English with an excellent Parisian accent:

“One has called me a young woman in a hurry,” she said, “and the description does not want of truth. I am impatient; I have large ideas; I am ambitious. If I were a grocer I should contract for the Sahara. I fall in love, and when Alice Leroux falls in love it is like the volcano which goes to make eruption. Figure to yourself that my man is shy—but of a shyness of the most ridiculous—that it is necessary to make a thousand sweet eyes at him before he comprehends that he loves me. And when he comprehends it, he does not speak. *Mon Dieu!* he does not speak, though

"I ENCIRCLE HIM WITH MY ARMS AND SPEAK WITH MY LIPS."

I speak, me, with my fan, my eyes, my fingers, almost with my lips. He walks with me—but he does not speak. He takes me to the spectacle—but he does not speak. He promenades himself in boat with me—but he does not speak. I encircle him with my arms, and I speak with my lips at last—one, two, three, four, five kisses. Overwhelmed, astonished, he returns me my kisses—hesitatingly, stupidly—but in fine, he returns them. And then at last—with our faces together, my arm round his graceful waist—he speaks. The first word of love comes from his mouth—and what think you that he say? Say then."

"I love you!" murmured Lillie.

"A thousand thunders! No! He says: Miss Leroux—Alice; may I call you Alice?"

"I see nothing to wonder at in that," replied Lillie quietly. "Remember that for a man to kiss you is a less serious step than for him to call you Alice. That were a stage on the road to marriage, and should only be reached through the gate of betrothal. Changes of name are the outward marks of a woman's development, as much as changes of form accompany the growth of the caterpillar. You, for instance, began life as Alice. In due course you became Miss Alice; if you were the eldest daughter you became Miss Leroux at once; if you were not, you inherited the name only on your sister's death or marriage; when you are betrothed you will revert to the simple Alice, and when you are married you will become Mrs. Something Else; and every time you get married, if you are careful to select husbands of varying patronymics, you will be furnished with a change of name as well as of address. Providence, which has conferred so many sufferings upon woman, has given her this one advantage over man, who in the majority of instances is doomed to the monotony of ossified nomenclature, and has to wear the same name on his tombstone which he wore on his Eton collar."

"That is all a heap of galimatias," replied the Parisienne with the flaming hair. "If I kiss a man, I, surely he may call me Alice without demanding it? Bah! Let him love your misses with *eau sucrée* in their veins. When he insulted me with his stupidity, I became furious. I threw him—how you say?—overboard on the instant."

"Good heavens!" gasped Lillie. "Then you are a murderess!"

"Figure you to yourself that I speak at the foot of the letter? Know you not the idioms of your own barbarian tongue? It seems to me you are as mad as he. Perhaps you are his sister."

"Certainly. Our rules require us to regard all men as brothers."

"*Hé?* What?"

"We have rejected the love of all men; consequently we have to regard them all as our brothers."

"That man there my brother!" shrieked Alice. "Never! Never of my life! I would rather marry him first!" And she went off to do so.

The last of these competitors for the Old Maiden Stakes was a whirlwind in petticoats, who welcomed the President very affably. "Good morning, Miss Dulcimer," she said. "I've heard of you. I'm from Boston way. You know I travel about the world in search of culture. I'm spending the day in Europe, so I thought I'd look you up. Would you be so good as to epitomise your scheme in twenty words? I've got to see the Madonna del Cardellino in the Uffizi at Florence before ten to-morrow, and I want to hear an act of the *Meistersingers* at Bayreuth after tea."

"I'm rather tired," pleaded Lillie, overwhelmed by the dynamic energy radiating from every square inch of the Bostonian's superficies. "I have had a hard morning's work. Couldn't you call again to-morrow?"

"Impossible. I have just wired to Damietta to secure rooms commanding a view of Professor Tickledroppe's excavations on the banks of the Nile. I dote on archæological treasures and thought I should like to see the Old Maids. Are they on view?"

"No, they are not here," said Lillie evasively. "But do you want to join us?"

"Shall I have time? I remember I once wasted a week getting married. Some women waste their whole lives that way. Marriage is an incident of life's novel—they make it the whole plot. I don't say it isn't an interesting experience. Every woman ought to go through it once, but with the infinite possibilities of culture lying all round us it's mere Philistinism to give one husbandman more than a week of our society. Mine is a physician practising in Philadelphia. Judging by the cheques he sends me he must be a successful man. Well, I am real glad to have had this little talk with you, it's been so interesting. I will become an honorary member of your charming Club with pleasure."

"You cannot if you are married. You can only be a visitor."

"What's my being married got to do with it?" inquired the American, in astonishment. "This is the first time I have ever heard that the name of a club has anything to do with the membership. Are the members of the Savage Club savages, of the Garrick Garricks, of the Supper Club suppers?"

"We are not men," Lillie said haughtily. "I could pass over your relation to the hub of the universe, but when it comes to having a private hub I have no option."

"Well, this may be your English idea of hospitality to travellers of culture," replied the Bostonian warmly; "but if you come to our crack Crank Club in the fall you shall be as welcome as a brand new poet. Good-bye. Hope we shall meet again. I shall be in Hong-Kong in June if you like to drop in. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Lillie, pressing one hand against the visitor's and the other to her aching forehead.

Silverdale found her dissolved in tears. "In future," he said, when she had explained her troubles, "I shall hang the rules and by-laws in the waiting-room. The candidates will then be able to eliminate themselves. By the way, Ellaline Rand's *Cherub* is going to sit up aloft on a third floor in Fleet Street."

CHAPTER XVII

A MUSICAL BAR

WHEN Turple the Magnificent, looking uneasy, brought up Frank Maddox's card, Lillie uttered a cry of surprise and pleasure. Frank Maddox was a magic name to her as to all the elect of the world of sweetness and light. After a moment of nervous anxiety lest it should not be *the* Frank Maddox, her fears were dispelled by the entry of the great authority on art and music, whose face was familiar to her from frontispiece portraits. Few critics possessed such charms of style and feature as Frank Maddox, who had a delicious *retroussé* nose, a dainty rose-bud mouth, blue eyes, and a wealth of golden hair.

Lillie's best hopes were confirmed. The famous critic wished to become an Old Maid. The President and the new and promising candidate had a delightful chat over a cup of tea and the prospects of the Club. The two girls speedily became friends.

"But if you join us, hadn't you better go back to your maiden name?" inquired Lillie.

"Perhaps so," said Frank Maddox thoughtfully. "My pen-name does sound odd under the peculiar circumstances. On the other hand, to revert to Laura Spragg now might be indiscreet. People would couple my name with Frank Maddox's—you know the way of the world. The gossips get their facts so distorted, and I couldn't even deny the connection."

"But of course you *have* had your romance?" asked Lillie. "You know one romance per head is our charge for admission."

"Oh yes. I have had my romance. In three vols. Shall I tell it you?"

"If you please."

"Listen, then. Volume I.: Frank Maddox is in her study. Outside the sun is setting in furrows of gold-laced sagging storm-clouds, dun and——"

"Oh, please, I always skip that," laughed Lillie. "I know that two lovers cannot walk in a lane without the author seeing the sunset, which is the last thing in the world the lovers see. But when the sky begins to look Black, I always begin to skip."

"Forgive me. I didn't mean to do it. Remember I'm an habitual art-critic. I thought I was describing a harmony of Whistler's or a movement from a sonata. It shall not occur again. To the heroine enter the hero—shabby, close-cropped, pale. Their eyes meet. He is thunder-struck to find the heroine a woman; blushes, stammers, and offers to go away. Struck by something of innate refinement in his manner, she presses him to avow the object of his visit. At last, in dignified language, infinitely touching in its reticence, he confesses he called on Mr. Frank Maddox, the writer he admires so much, to ask a little pecuniary help. He is starving. Original, isn't it, to have your hero hungry in the first chapter? He speaks vaguely of having ambitions which, unless he goes under in the struggle for

"THERE'S A PRESCRIPTION AGAINST STARVATION."

existence, may some day be realised. There are so many men in London like that. However, heroine is moved by his destitute condition, and, sitting down to her desk, she writes out a note, folds it up and gives it to him. 'There!' she says, 'there's a prescription against starvation.' 'But how am I to take it?' he asked. 'It must be taken before breakfast, the first thing in the morning,' she replied, 'to the editor of the *Moon*. Give him the note; he will change it for you. Don't mention my name.'

"He thanked me and withdrew."

"And what was in the note?" asked Lillie curiously.

"I can't quite remember. But something of this sort: 'The numerous admirers of Frank Maddox will be gratified to hear that she has in the press a volume of essays on the part played by colour-blindness in the symphonic movements of the time. The great critic is still in town, but leaves for Torquay next Tuesday.' For that the editor of the *Moon* gave him half-a-crown."

"Do you call that charity?" said Lillie, astonished.

"Certainly. Charity begins at home. Do many people give charity except to advertise themselves? Philanthropy by paragraph is a perquisite of fame. Why, I have a pensioner who comes in for all my *Acadæum* paragraphs. That *Moon* par. saved our hero from starvation. Years afterwards, I learnt he had frittered away twopence in having his hair cut."

"It seems strange for a starving man to get his hair cut," said Lillie.

"Not when you know the cause," replied Frank Maddox. "It was his way of disguising himself. And this brings me to Volume II. The years pass. Once again I am in my study. There is a breath of wind among the elms in the front garden, and the sky is strewn with vaporous sprays of apple-blossom—I beg your pardon. Re-enter the hero—spruce, frock-coated, dignified. He recalls himself to my memory—but I remember him only too well. He tells me that my half-crown saved him at the turning-point of his career, that he has now achieved fame and gold, that he loves my writings more passionately than ever, and that he has come to ask me to crown his life. The whole thing is so romantic that I am about to whisper 'Yes,' when an instinct of common sense comes to my aid, and my half-opened lips murmur instead—'But the name you sent up—Horace Paul—it is not known to me. You say you have won fame. I, at least, have never heard of you.'"

"'Of course not,' he replies. 'How should you? If I were Horace Paul you would not marry me; just as I should certainly not marry you if you were Frank Maddox. But what of Paul Horace?'"

"Paul Horace!" cried Lillie. "The great composer!"

"That is just what I exclaimed. And my hero answers—'The composer, great or little. None but a few intimates connect me with him. The change of name is too simple. I always had a longing—call it morbid if you will—for obscurity in the midst of renown. I have weekly harvests of hair to escape any suspicion of musical attainments. But you and I, dearest—think of what our life will be, enriched by our common love of the noblest of the arts.' Outside, the marigolds nod to the violets, the sapphire—excuse me. I mean to say, thus he rambled on, growing in enthusiasm with every ardent phrase, the while a deadly coldness was fastening round my heart. For I felt that it could not be."

"And why?" inquired Lillie, in astonishment. "It seems one of the marriages made in heaven."

"I dared not tell him why; and I can only tell you on condition you promise to keep my secret."

"I promise."

"Listen," whispered the great critic. "I know nothing about music or art, and I was afraid he would find me out."

Lillie fell back in her chair, white and trembling. Another idol shivered. "But how——?" she gasped.

"There, there, don't take on so," said the great critic kindly. "I did not think you too were such an admirer of mine, else I might have spared you the shock. You ask how it is done. Well, I didn't set out to criticise. I can at least plead that in extenuation. My nature is not wilfully perverse. There was a time when I was as pure and above criticism as yourself."

She paused and furtively wiped away a tear, then resumed more calmly:

"I drifted into it. For years I toiled on, without ever a thought of musical or art criticism sullying my maiden meditations. My downfall was gradual. In early maidenhood I earned my living as a type-writer. I had always had literary yearnings, but the hard facts of life allowed me only this rough approximation to my ideal. Accident brought excellent literature to my machine, and it required all my native honesty not to steal the plots of the novelists and the good things of the playwrights. The latter was the harder temptation to resist, for when the play was good enough to be worth stealing from, I knew it would never be produced, and my crime never discovered. Still, in spite of my honesty, I benefited indirectly by my type-writing, for contact with so much admirable work fostered the graceful literary style which, between you and me, is my only merit. In time I plucked up courage to ask one of my clients, a journalist, if he could put some newspaper work in my way. 'What can you do?' he asked, in surprise. 'Anything,' I replied, with maiden modesty. 'I see, that's your special line,' he said musingly. 'Unfortunately, we are full up in that department. You see, every one turns his hand to that — it's like teaching, the first thing people think of. It's a pity you are a girl, because the way to journalistic distinction lies through the position of office-boy. Office-girl sounds strange. I doubt whether they would have you, except on a Freethought organ. Our office-boy has to sweep out the office and review the novels, else you might commence humbly as a critic of literature. It isn't a bad post either, for he supplements his income by picking rejected matter out of the waste-paper basket, and surreptitiously lodging it in the 'printer's copy' pigeon-hole. His income in fees from journalistic aspirants must be considerable. Yes, had you been a boy you might have made a pretty good thing out of literature.' 'Then there is no chance at all for me on your paper?' I inquired desperately. 'None,' he said sadly. 'Our editor is an awful old fogey. He is vehemently opposed to the work of outsiders, and if you were to send him his own leaders in envelopes he would say they were rot. For once he would be a just critic. You see, therefore, what your own chance is. Even I, who have been on the staff for years, couldn't do anything to help you. No, I am afraid there is no hope for you unless you approach our office-boy.' I thanked him warmly for his advice and encouragement, and within a fortnight an article of mine appeared in the paper. It was called 'The Manuscripts of Authors,' and revealed, in a refined and ladylike way, the secrets of the chirographic characteristics of the manuscripts I had to type-write. My friend said I was exceedingly practical——"

"Exceedingly practical," agreed Lillie, with a suspicion of a sneer.

"Because most amateur journalists write about abstract principles, whereas I had sliced out for the public a bit of concrete fact, and the great heart of the people went out to

THE OFFICE-BOY EDITS THE PAPER.

hear the details of the way Brown wrote his books, Jones his jokes, and Robinson his recitations. The article made a hit, and annoyed the authors very much."

"So I should think," said Lillie. "Didn't they withdraw their custom from you instanter?"

"Why? They didn't know it was I. Only my journalistic friend knew, and he was too much of a gentleman to give away my secret. I wrote to the editor under the name of Frank Maddox, thanking him for having inserted my article, and the editor said to my friend—'Egad, I fancy I've made a discovery there. Why, if I were to pay any attention to your idea of keeping strictly to the old grooves, the paper would stagnate, my boy, simply stagnate.' The editor was right, for my friend assured me the paper would have died long before, if the office-boy had not condescended to edit it. Anyhow, it was to that office-boy I owed my introduction to literature. The editor was very proud of having discovered me, and, being installed in his good graces, I passed rapidly into dramatic criticism, and was even allowed to under-study the office-boy as literary reviewer. He could not stomach historical novels, and handed over to me all works with pronouns in the second person singular. Gradually I rose to higher things, but it was not until I had been musical and art critic for over eighteen months that the editor learnt that the writer whose virile style he had often dilated upon to my friend was a woman."

"And what did he do when he learnt it?" asked Lillie.

"He swore——"

"Profane man!" cried Lillie.

"That he loved me—me whom he had never seen. Of course, I declined him with thanks; happily there was a valid excuse, because he had written his communication on both sides of the paper. But even this technical touch did not mollify him, and he replied that my failure to appreciate him showed I could no longer be trusted as a critic. Fortunately my work had been signed, my fame was established. I collected my articles into a book, and joined another paper."

"But you haven't yet told me 'how it is done'?"

"Oh, that is the least. You see, to be a critic it is not essential to know anything—you must simply be able to write. To be a great critic you must simply be able to write *well.* In my omnescience, or catholic ignorance, I naturally looked about for the subject on which I could most profitably employ my gift of style with the least chance of being found out. A moment's consideration will convince you that the most difficult branches of criticism are the easiest. Of musical and artistic matters not one person in a thousand understands aught but the rudiments; here, then, is the field in which the critical ignoramus may expatiate at large with the minimum danger of discovery. Nay, with no scintilla of danger, for the subject-matter is so obscure and abstruse that the grossest of errors may put on a bold face, and parade as a profundity, or, driven to bay, proclaim itself paradox. Only say what you have not got to say authoritatively and well, and the world shall fall down and worship you. The place of art in religion has undergone a peculiar historical development. First men worshipped the object of art; then they worshipped the artist; and now-a-days they worship the art critic."

"It is true," said Lillie reflectively. "This age has witnessed the apotheosis of the art critic."

"And of all critics. And yet what can be more evident than that the art of criticism was never in such a critical condition? Nobody asks to see the critic's credentials. He is taken at his own valuation. There ought to be an examination to protect the public. Even schoolmasters are now required to have certificates; while those who pretend to train the larger mind in the way it should think are left to work their mischief uncontrolled. No dramatic critic should be allowed to practise without an elementary knowledge of human life, law, Shakespeare, and French. The musical critic should be required to be able to perform on some one instrument other than his own trumpet, to distinguish tune from tonality, to construe the regular sonata, to comprehend the plot of 'Il Trovatore,' and to understand the motives of Wagner. The art critic should be able to discriminate between a pastel and a water-colour, an impressionist drawing and a rough sketch, to know the Dutch school from the Italian, and the female figure from the male; to translate morbidezza and chiaroscuro, and, failing this, to be aware of the existence and uses of a vanishing point. A doctor's certificate should also be produced to testify that the examinee is in possession of all the normal faculties,—deafness, blindness, and colour-blindness being regarded as disqualifications,—and no one should be allowed to practise unless he enjoyed a character for common honesty, supplemented by a testimonial from a clergyman; for although art is non-moral, the critic should be moral. This would be merely the passman stage; there could always be examinations in honours for the graduates. Once the art critics were educated, the progress of the public would be rapid. They would no longer be ready to admire the canvases of Michael Angelo, who, as I learnt the other day for the first time, painted frescoes; nor would they prefer him, as unhesitatingly as they do now, to Buonarotti, which is his surname; nor would they imagine Raphael's cartoons appeared in *Puncinello*. All these mistakes I have myself made, though no one discovered them; while in the realm of music no one has more misrepresented the masters, more discouraged the overtures of young composers."

"But still I do not understand how it is done," urged Lillie.

"You shall have my formula in a nutshell. I had to be a musical critic and an art critic. I was ignorant of music, and knew nothing of art. But I was a dab at language. When I was talking of music, I used the nomenclature of art. I spoke of light and shade, colour and form, delicacy of outline, depth and atmosphere, perspective, foreground and background, nocturnes and harmonies in blue. I analysed symphonies pictorially, and explained what I saw defiling before me as the music swept on. Sunsets and belvedere towers, swarthy Paynims on Shetland ponies, cypress plumes and Fra Angelico's cherubs, lumps of green clay and delicate pillared loggias, fennel tufts and rococo and scarlet anemones, and over all the trail of the serpent. Thus I created an epoch in musical criticism. On the other hand, when I had to deal with art, I was careful to eschew every suggestion of the visual vocabulary, and to confine myself to musical phrases. In talking of pictures, I dwelt upon their counterpoint and their orchestration, their changes of key and the evolution of their ideas, their piano and forte passages, and their bars of rest, their allegro and diminuendo aspects, their suspensions on the dominant. I spoke of them as symphonies and sonatas and masses, —said one was too staccato, and another too full of consecutive sevenths, and a third in need of transposition to the minor. Thus I created an epoch in art criticism. In both departments the vague and shifting terms I introduced enabled me to evade mistakes and avoid detection, while the creation of two epochs gave me the very first place in contemporary criticism. There is nothing in which I would not undertake to create an epoch. I do not say I have always been happy, and it has been a source of constant regret to me that I had not even learnt to play the piano when a girl, and that unplayed music still remained to me little black dots."

"And so you did not dare marry the composer?"

"No, nor tell him why. Volume III.: I said I admired him so much that I wanted to go on devoting critical essays to him, and my praises would be discounted by the public if I were his wife. Was it not imprudent for him to alienate the leading critic by marrying her? Rather would I sacrifice myself, and continue to criticise him. But I love him, and it is for his sake I would become an Old Maid."

"I would rather you didn't," said Lillie, her face still white. "I have found so much inspiration in your books that I could not bear to be daily reminded I ought not to have found it."

Poor President! The lessons of experience were hard! The Club taught her much she were happier without.

That day Lord Silverdale appropriately intoned (with banjo obligato) a patter-song, which he pretended to have written at the Academy, whence he had just come with the conventional splitting headache.

AFTER THE ACADEMY—A JINGLE

NOT BY ALFRED JINGLE

Brain a-whirling, pavement twirling,
Cranium aching, almost baking,
Mind a muddle, puddle, fuddle.
Million pictures, million mixtures,
Small and great 'uns, Brown's and Leighton's,
Sky and wall un's, short and tall 'uns,

Pseudo-classic (for, alas! *Sic*
Transit gloria sub Victoriâ),
Landscape, figure, white or nigger,
Steely etchings, inky sketchings,
Genre, portrait (not one caught trait),
Eke historic (kings plethoric),
Realistic, prize-fight-fistic,
Entozoic, nude heroic,
Coarse, poetic, homiletic,
Still-life (flowers, tropic bowers),
Pure domestic, making breast tick
With emotion; endless ocean,
Glaze or scumble, craze and jumble,
Varnish mastic, sculpture plastic,
Canvas, paper (oh, for taper!),
Oil and water (oh, for slaughter!),
Children, cattle, 'buses, battle,
Seamen, satyrs, lions, waiters,
Nymphs and peasants, peers and pheasants,
Dogs and flunkeys, gods and monkeys,
Half-dressed ladies, views of Hades,
Phyllis tripping, seas and shipping,
Hearth and meadow, brooks and bread-dough
Doves and dreamers, stars and streamers,
Saucepans, blossoms, rags, opossums,
Tramway, cloudland, wild and ploughed land,
Gents and mountains, clocks and fountains,
Pan and pansy—these of fancy
Have possession in procession
Never ending, ever blending,
All a-flitter and a-glitter,
Ever prancing, ever dancing
Ever whirling, ever curling,
Ever swirling, ever twirling,
Ever bobbing, ever throbbing.
Ho! some brandy—is it handy?
Air seems tainting—I am fainting.
Hang all—no, *don't* hang all—painting

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BEAUTIFUL GHOUL

Wee Winnie called at the Club, while the President was still under the cloud of depression, and Lillie had to force herself to look cheerful, lest Miss Nimrod should mistake the melancholy, engendered by so many revelations of the seamy side of life, for loss of faith in the Club or its prospects. Avid of experience as was the introspective little girl, she felt almost sated for the present.

Miss Nimrod was astonished to hear of the number of recent rejections, and to learn that she had whipped up the Writers and the Junior Widows and her private friends to such little purpose. But in the end she agreed with Lillie that, as no doubt somewhere or other in the wide universe ideal Old Maids were blooming and breathing, it would be folly to clog themselves up in advance with inferior specimens.

The millionaire, who was pottering about in his blue spectacles, strolled into the Club while Wee Winnie was uttering magnificent rhapsodies about the pages the Club would occupy in the histories of England; but this time Lillie was determined the dignity of the by-laws should be maintained, and had her father shown out by Turple the Magnificent. Miss Nimrod went too, and so Lord Silverdale had the pleasure of finding Lillie alone.

"You ought to present me with a pair of white gloves," he said gleefully.

"Why?" asked Lillie.

"I haven't had a single candidate to try for days."

"No," said Lillie, with a suspicion of weariness in her voice, "they all broke down in the elementary stage."

Even as she spoke Turple the Magnificent ushered in Miss Margaret Linbridge. Lord Silverdale, doubly vexed at having been a little too previous in the counting of his chickens, took up his hat to go, but Lillie murmured, "Please amuse yourself in the library for a quarter of an hour, as I may want you to do the trying at once."

"How do you expect me to amuse myself in the library?" he grumbled. "You don't keep one of my books."

Miss Margaret Linbridge's story was simple, almost commonplace.

"I had spent Christmas with a married sister in Plymouth," she said, "and was returning to London by the express on the first of January. My prospects for the New Year were bright—or seemed so to my then unsophisticated eyes. I was engaged to be married to Richard Westbourne—a good and good-looking young man, not devoid of pecuniary attractions. My brother, with whom I lived and on whom I was dependent, was a struggling young firework-manufacturer, and would, I knew, be glad to see me married, even if it cost him a portion of his stock to express his joy. The little seaside holiday had made me look my prettiest, and when my brother-in-law saw me into a first-class carriage and left me with a fraternally-legal kiss, I rather pitied him for having to go back to my sister. There was only one other person in the carriage besides myself—a stern old gentleman, who sat crumpled up in the opposite corner and read a paper steadily.

"The train flew along the white frosty landscape at express rates, but the old gentleman never looked up from his paper. The temperature was chill, and I coughed. The old gentleman evinced no symptom of sympathy. I rolled up my veil the better to see the curmudgeon, and smiled to think what a fool he was, but he betrayed no sign of sharing my amusement.

"At last, as he was turning his page, I said in my most dulcet tones, 'Oh, please excuse my appropriating the entire foot-warmer. I don't know why there is only one, but I will share it with you with pleasure.'

"'Thank you,' he said gruffly, 'I'm not cold.'

"'Oh, aren't you!' I murmured inwardly, adding aloud, with a severe wintry tone, 'Gentlemen of your age usually are.'

"'Yes, but I'm not a gentleman of my age,' he growled, mistaking the imbecile statement for repartee.

"'I beg your pardon,' I said. 'I was judging by appearances. Is that the *Saturday Slasher* you have there?'

"He shook himself impatiently. 'No, it is not.'

"'I beg your pardon,' I said. 'I was again judging by appearances. May I ask what it is?'

"'*Threepenny Bits!*' he jerked back.

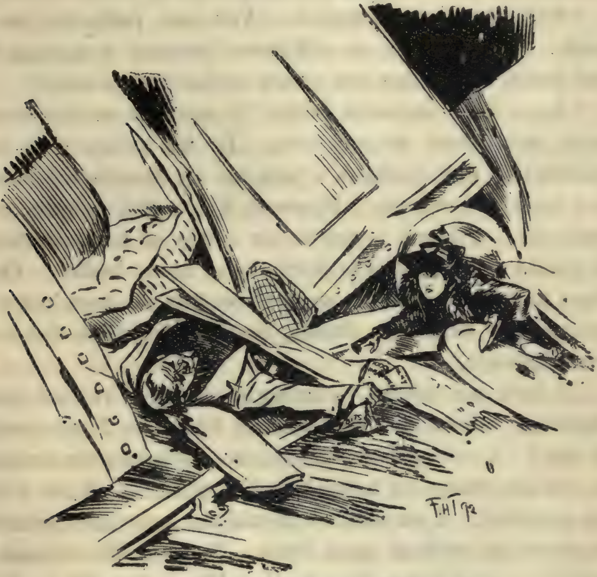
"'What's that?' I asked. 'I know *Broken Bits*.'

"'This is a superior edition of *Broken Bits* at the price indicated by the title. It contains the same matter, but is issued at a price adapted to the means of the moneyed and intellectual classes. No self-respecting person can be seen reading penny weeklies—it throws doubt not only on his income, but on his mental calibre. The idea of this first-class edition (so to speak) should make the fortune of the proprietor, and deservedly so. Of course the thousand pound railway assurance scheme is likewise trebled, though this part of the paper does not attract me personally, for my next-of-kin is a hypocritical young rogue. But imagine the horror of being found dead with a penny weekly in one's pocket! You can't even explain it away.'

"He had hardly finished the sentence before a terrible shock, as of a ton of dynamite exploding under the foot-warmer, lifted me into the air; the carriage collapsed like matchwood, and I had the feeling of being thrown into the next world. For a moment I recovered a gleam of consciousness, just enough to show me I was lying dying amid the *débris*, and that my companion lay, already dead, in a fragment of the compartment, *Threepenny Bits* clenched in his lifeless hand.

"With a last fond touch I smoothed my hair, which had got rather ruffled in the catastrophe, and, extracting with infinite agony a puff from my pocket, I dabbed it spasmodically over my face. I dared not consult my hand-mirror, I was afraid it would reveal a distorted countenance and unnecessarily sadden my last moments. Whatever my appearance, I had done my best for it, and I wanted to die with the consciousness of duty fulfilled. Murmuring a prayer that those who found my body would not imitate me in judging by appearances, if they should prove discreditable after all, I closed my eyes upon the world in which I had been so young and happy. My whole life passed in review before me, all my dearly loved bonnets, my entire wardrobe from infancy upwards. Now I was an innocent child with a white sash and pink ribbons, straying amid the sunny meadows and plucking the daisies to adorn my hats; anon a merry maiden sporting amid the jocund schoolboys and receiving tribute in toffy; then again a sedate virgin in original gowns and tailor-made jackets. Suddenly a strange idea jostled through the throng of bitter-sweet memories. *Threepenny Bits!*

"The old gentleman's next-of-kin would come in for three thousand pounds! I should die and leave nothing to my relatives but regrets; my generous brother would be for ever inconsolable now, and my funeral might be mean and unworthy. And yet if the old misogynist had only been courteous enough to lend me the paper, seeing I had nothing to read, it might have been found on my body. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum.* Why reveal his breach of etiquette to the world? Why should I not enable him to achieve posthumous politeness! Besides, his heir was a hypocritical rogue, and it were a crime against society to place so large a sum at his disposal. Overwhelmed as I



"I PULLED THE PAPER FROM THE DEAD HAND."

was by the agonies of death, I steeled myself to this last duty. I wriggled painfully towards the corpse, and, stretching out my neatly-gloved fingers, with a last mighty effort I pulled the paper cautiously from the dead hand which lay heavy upon it. Then I clasped it passionately to my heart, and died."

"Died?" echoed Lillie excitedly.

"Well—lost consciousness. You *are* particular to a shade. Myself, I see no difference between a fainting fit and death, except that one attack of the latter is fatal."

"As to that," answered Lillie, "I consider we die every night and dream we are alive. To fall asleep is to die painlessly. It is, perhaps, a pity we are resurrected to tea and toast and toilette. However, I am glad you did not really die. I feared I was in for a tale of re-incarnation, or spooks or hypnotism or telepathy or astral bodies. One hears so many marvellous stories now that we have left off believing in miracles. Really, man's credulity is the perpetual miracle."

"*I* have not left off believing in miracles," replied Miss Linbridge seriously. "How could I? Was I not saved by one? A very gallant miracle, too, for it took no trouble to save my crusty old fellow-traveller, while it left me without a scratch. I am afraid I should not have been grateful for salvation without good looks. To face life without a pretty face were worse than death. You agree with me?"

"Not entirely. There are higher things in life than beautiful faces," said Lillie gravely.

"Certainly. Beautiful bonnets," said the candidate, with laughing levity. "And lower things—beautiful boots. But you would not seriously argue that there is anything else so indispensable to a woman as beauty, or that to live plain is worth the trouble of living?"

"Why not? Plain living and high thinking!" murmured Lillie.

"All nonsense! We needn't pretend—we aren't with men. You would talk differently if you were born ugly! Goodness gracious! don't we know that a girl may have a whole cemetery of virtues, and no man will look at her if she is devoid of charms of face or purse? It's all humbug what Ruskin says about a well-bred modest girl being necessarily beautiful. It is only a pleasing fiction that morality is invaluable to the complexion. Of course if Ruskin's girl chose to dress with care, she could express her goodness less plainly, but as a rule goodness and dowdiness are synonymous. I think the function of a woman is to look well, and our severest reprobation should be extended to those conscienceless creatures who allow themselves to be seen in the company of gentlemen, in frumpish attire. It is a breach of etiquette towards the other sex. A woman must do credit to the man who stakes his reputation for good taste by being seen in her society. She must achieve beauty for his sake, and should no more leave her boudoir without it than if she were an actress leaving her dressing-room."

"That the man expects the woman to make his friends envy him is true," answered Lillie, "and I have myself expressed this in yonder epigram. *It is man who is vain of woman's dress.* But were we created merely to gratify man's vanity?"

"Is not that a place in nature to be vain of? We are certainly not proud of man. Think of the average husband over whom the woman has to shed the halo of her beauty. It is like poetry and prose bound together. It is because I intend to be permanently beautiful that I have come to cast in my lot with the Old Maids' Club. Your rules ordain it so, and rightly."

"The Club must be beautiful, certainly, but merely to escape being twitted with ugliness by the shallow—for the rest, it should disdain beauty. However, pray continue your story. It left off at a most interesting point. You had lost consciousness."

"Yes; but as my chivalrous miracle had saved me from danger, I was found unconsciously beautiful (which I have always heard is the most graceful way of wearing your beauty). I soon came to myself with the aid of a dark-eyed doctor, and I then learnt that the old gentleman had been too weak to sustain the shock, and that his poor old pulse had ceased to beat. My rescuers had not disturbed *Threepenny Bits* from its position 'twixt my hand and heart, in case I should die and need it. So when the line was cleared, and I was sent on to London after a pleasant lunch with the dark-eyed doctor, I had the journal to read after all, despite the discourtesy of the deceased. When I arrived at Paddington I found Richard Westbourne walking the platform like Hamlet's father's ghost, white and trembling. He was scanning the carriages feverishly as the train glided in with its habitual nonchalance.

"'My darling!' he cried, when he caught sight of my dainty hat with its sweet trimmings. 'Thank Heaven!' He twisted the door violently open and kissed me before all the crowd. Fortunately I had my lovely spotted veil down, so that he only pressed the tulle to my lips.

"'What is the matter?' I said ingenuously.

"'The accident!' he gasped. 'Weren't you in the accident?'

"'Of course I was. But my dress was not very much crumpled. If I had sat in the other corner I should have been killed!'

"'My heroine!' he cried. 'How brave of you!'

He made as if he would rumple my hair, but I drew back.

"'Were you waiting for me?' I asked.

"'Of course. Hours and hours. Oh, the agony of it! See, here is the evening paper! It gives you as dead.'

"'Where?' I cried nervously. His trembling forefinger pointed to the place—"A beautiful young lady was also extricated in an unconscious condition from this carriage."

"'Isn't it wonderful the news should be in London before me?' I murmured. 'But I suppose they will have names and fuller particulars in a later edition?'

"'Of course. But fancy my having to be in London—unable to get to you for love or money!'

"'Yes, it was very hard for me to be there all alone,' I murmured. 'But please run and see after my luggage. There are three portmanteaus and a little black one and three bonnet boxes and two parasols, and call a hansom —oh, and a brown paper parcel and a long narrow cardboard box; and get me the latest editions of the evening papers; and please see that the driver isn't drunk, and don't take a knock-kneed horse or one that paws the ground, you know those hansom doors fly open and shoot you out like rubbish—I do so hate them; and oh, Richard, don't forget those novels from Mudie's—they're done up with a strap. Three bonnet boxes, remember, and *all* the evening papers—mind!'

"When we were bowling homewards, he kept expressing his joy by word and deed, so that I was unable to read my papers. At last, annoyed, I said, 'You wouldn't be so glad if you knew that my resurrection cost three thousand pounds.'

"'How do you mean?'

"'Why, if I had died, somebody would have had three thousand pounds. This number of *Threepenny Bits* would have been found on my body, and would have entitled my heir to that amount of assurance money. I need not tell you who my heir is, nor to whom I had left my little all.'

"I looked into his face, and from the tenderness that overflowed it I saw he fancied himself the favoured mortal. There is no end to the conceit of young men. A sensible fellow would have known at once that my brother was the only person reasonably entitled to my scanty belongings. However, there is no good done by disturbing a lover's complacency.

"'I do not want your money,' he answered, again passionately pressing my tulle veil to my lips. 'I infinitely prefer your life.'

"'What a bloodthirsty highwayman!'

"'I shall steal another kiss. I would rather have you than all the gold in the world.'

"'Still, gold is the next best thing,' I said, smiling at his affectionateness, which my absence had evidently fostered. 'So, being on the point of death, as I thought, I resolved to make death worth dying, and leave a heap of gold to the man I loved. This number of *Threepenny Bits* was not mine originally. When the crash occurred, it was being read by the old gentleman in the opposite corner, but his next of kin is a hypocritical young scapegrace (so he told me), and I thought it would be far nicer for *my* heir to come in for the money. So I took it from his body the very instant before I fainted dead away!'

"'My heroine!' he cried again. 'So you thought of your Richard even at the point of death? What a sweet assurance of your love!'

"'Yes, an assurance of three thousand pounds,' I answered, laughing merrily. 'And now, perhaps, you will let me read the details of the catastrophe. The reporters seem to know ever so much more about it than I do. It's getting so dusky I can hardly see—I wonder what was the name of old grizzly growler—ah, here it is! The pocket-book contained letters addressed to Josiah Twaddon, Esquire, and——'

"'Twaddon, did you say?' gasped Richard, clutching the paper frantically.

"'Yes—don't! You've torn it! Twaddon, I can see it plainly.'

"'Does it give his address?' Richard panted.

"'Yes,' I said, surprised. 'I was just going on to read that—4 Bucklesbury Buildings——'

"'Great heavens!' he cried.

"'What is it? Why are you so pale and agitated? Was he anything to you? Ah, I guess it—by my prophetic soul, your uncle!'

"'Yes,' he answered bitterly. 'My uncle! My mother's brother! Wretched woman, what have you done?'

"My heart was beating painfully, and I felt hot all over, but outwardly I froze.

"'You know what I have done,' I replied icily.

"'Yes, robbed me of three thousand pounds!' he cried.

"'How dare you say that?' I answered indignantly. 'Why, it was for you I meant them!'

"The statement was not, perhaps, strictly accurate, but my indignation was sufficiently righteous to cover a whole pack of lies.

"'Your intentions may have been strictly honourable,' he retorted; 'but your behaviour was abominable. Great heavens! Do you know that you could be prosecuted?'

"'Nonsense!' I said stoutly, though my heart misgave me. 'What for?'

"'What for? You, a plunderer of the dead—a harpy, a ghoul—ask what for?'

"'But the thing was of no value!' I urged.

"'Of no intrinsic value, perhaps, but of immense value under the peculiar circumstances. Why, if any one chose to initiate a prosecution, you would be sent to gaol as a common thief.'

"'Pardon me,' I said haughtily. 'You forget you are speaking to a lady. As such I can never be more than a kleptomaniac. You might force me to suffer from hysteria in the past, but the worst that could befall me now would be a most interesting advertisement. Prosecute me and you will create for me an army of friends all the world over. If it is thus that lovers behave, it is better to have friends. I shall be glad of the exchange.'

"'You know that I could not prosecute you,' he answered more gently.

"'After your language to me you are capable of anything. Your uncle called you a rogue with his dying breath, and statements made with that are generally veracious. Prosecute me if you will—I have done you out of three thousand pounds, and I am glad of it. Only one favour I will ask of you—for the sake of our old relations—give me fair warning!'

"'That you may flee the country?'

"'No; that I may get a new collection of photographs.'

"'You will submit to being taken by the police?'

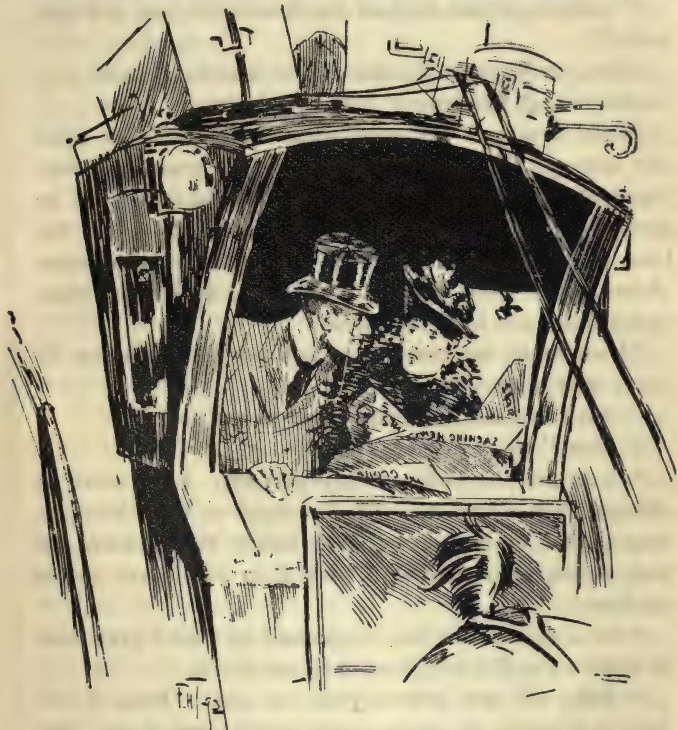
"'Yes—after I have been taken by the photographer.'

"'But look at the position you will be in.'

"'I shall be in six different positions—one for each of the chief illustrated papers.'

"'Your flippancy is ill-timed, Margaret,' said Richard sternly.

"'Flippant, good heavens! Do you know me so little as to consider me capable of flippancy? Richard, this is the last straw. You have called me a thief, you have threatened to place me in the felon's dock, and I have answered you with soft words, but no man shall call me flippant and continue to be engaged to me!'



"I CAN NEVER BE MORE THAN A KLEPTOMANIAC."

"'But Maggie, darling!' His tone was changing. He saw he had gone too far. 'Consider! It is not only I that am the loser by your—indiscretion, your generous indiscretion——'

"'My indiscreet generosity,' I corrected.

"He accepted my 'indiscreet generosity,' and went on.

"'Cannot you see that, as my future wife, you will also suffer?'

"'But surely you will come in for something under your uncle's will, all the same?' I reminded him.

"'Not a stiver. He never made a will, he never saved any money. He was the most selfish brute that ever breathed. All the money he couldn't spend on himself he gave away in charity, so as to get the kudos during his lifetime, pretending that there was no merit in post-mortem philanthropy. And now all the good he might have done by his death you have cancelled.'

"I sat mute, my complexion altered for the worse by pangs of compunction.

"'But I can make amends,' I murmured at last.

"'How?' he asked eagerly.

"'I can tell the truth—at least partially. I can make an affidavit that *Threepenny Bits* belonged to my fellow-passenger, that he lent it me just before the accident, or that, seeing he was dead, I took it to hand over to his relatives.'

"For a moment his face brightened up, then it grew dark as suddenly as if it had been lit by electricity.

"'They will not believe you,' he said. 'Even if you were a stranger, the paper would contest my claim. But considering your relation to me — considering that the money would fall to you as much as to me, no common-sense jury would credit your evidence.'

"'Well, then, we must break off our engagement.'

"'What would be the good of that? They would ferret out our past relations; would suspect their resumption immediately after the verdict.'

"'Well, then, we must break off our engagement,' I repeated decisively. 'I could never marry a prosecutor *in posse*—a man in whose heart was smouldering a petty sense of pecuniary injury.'

"'If you married me I should cease to be a prosecutor *in posse*,' he said soothingly. 'As the law stands, a husband cannot give evidence against his wife in criminal cases.'

"'Oh well, then you'd become a persecutor *in esse*,' I retorted. 'You'd always have something to throw in my teeth, and for my part I could never forgive you the wrong I have done you. We could not possibly live together.'

"My demeanour was so chilling, my tone so resolute, that Richard was panic-stricken. He vowed, protested, stormed, entreated, but nothing could move me.

"'A kindly accident has shown me your soul,' I answered, 'and the sight is not encouraging. Fortunately I have seen it in time. You remember when you took me to see *The Doll's House*, you said that Nora was quite right in all she did. I daresay it was because the actress was so charming—but let that pass. And yet what are you but another Helmer? Just see how exact is the parallel between our story and Ibsen's. Nora in all innocence forged her husband's name in order to get the money to restore him to health. I in all innocence steal a threepenny paper, in order to leave you three thousand pounds by my death. When things turn out wrong you turn round on me, just as Helmer turned round on Nora—forgetting for whose sake the deed was done. If Nora was justified in leaving her husband, how much more justified must I be in leaving my betrothed!'"

"The cases are not quite on all-fours," interrupted the President, who had pricked up her ears at the mention of the "Woman's Poet." "You must not forget that you did not really sin for his sake, but for your brother's."

"That is an irrelevant detail," replied the beautiful ghoul. "He thought I did—which comes to the same thing. Besides, my telling him I did only increases the resemblance between me and Nora. She was an awful fibber, if you remember. Richard, of course, disclaimed the likeness to Helmer, though in doing so he was more like him than ever. But I would give him no word of hope.

"'We could never be happy together,' I said. 'Our union would never be real! There would always be the three thousand pounds between us.'

"'Well, that would be fifteen hundred each,' he answered, with ghastly jocularity.

"'This ill-timed flippancy ends all,' I said solemnly. 'Henceforth, Mr. Westbourne, we must be strangers.'

"He sat like one turned to stone. Not till the cab arrived at my brother's house did he speak again.

"Then he said in low tones, 'Maggie, can I never become anything to you but a stranger?'

"'The greatest miracle of all would have to happen, then, Richard,' I quoted coldly. Then, rejecting his proffered assistance, I alighted from the vehicle, and passed majestically across the threshold, and mounted the stairs with stately step, not a sign, not the slightest tremor of a muscle betraying what I felt. Only when I was safe in my own little room, with its lavender-scented sheets and its thousand childish associations, did my pent-up emotions overpower me. I threw myself upon my little white bed in a paroxysm of laughter. I had come out of a disagreeable situation agreeably, leaving Dick in the wrong, and I felt sure I could whistle him back as easily as the hansom."

"And what became of Richard?" asked Lillie.

"I left him to settle with the cabman. I have never seen him since."

Lillie gave a little shudder. "You speak as if the cabman had settled with him. But are you sure you are willing to renounce all mankind because you find one man unsatisfactory?"

"All. I was very young when I got engaged. I did not want to be a burden on my brother. But now his firework factory is a brilliant success. He lives in a golden rain. Having only myself to please now, I don't see why I should have to please a husband. The more I think of marriage, the less I think of it. I am sure it wouldn't suit me. I have not kept my eyes open for nothing. Husbands are anything but the creatures a young girl's romantic fancy pictures. They have a way of disarranging the most careful toilettes. They ruffle your hair and your temper. They disorder the furniture, and put their feet on the mantelpiece. They scratch fenders, read books, and stretch themselves on the most valuable sofas. If they help in the household, they only make more work. They invite men home to dinner on Mondays, when you can't get any fish. The trail of tobacco is over all you prize; all day long the smoke gets into your eyes; filthy pipes clog your cabinets; your window-curtains reek of stale cigars. You have bartered your liberty for a mess of cigar-ash. There is an odour of bar-saloons about the house, and boon companions come to welter in whiskey and water. Their talk is of science and art and politics, and it makes them guffaw noisily, and dig one another in the ribs. There is not a man in the world to whom I would trust my sensitive fragility; they are all coarse, clumsy creatures, with a code of morals that they don't profess, and a creed of chivalry that they never practise. Falsehood abides permanently in their mouth like artificial teeth, and corruption lurks beneath the whited sepulchres of their shirt-fronts. They adore us in secret, and deride us when they are together. They feign a contempt for us which we feel for them."

These sentiments reinstated Miss Linbridge in the good opinion of the President, conscious heretofore of a jarring chord. She ordered in some refreshments, to get an opportunity of whispering to Turple the Magnificent that the Honorary Trier might return.

"Oh, by the way," said Miss Linbridge, "I hunted out that copy of *Threepenny Bits* before coming out. I have kept it in a drawer as a curiosity. Here it is."

Lillie took the paper and examined it curiously.

"What's that? *You* reading *Threepenny Bits?*" said Silverdale, coming in.

"It's only an old number," said Lillie, "whereby hangs a tale. Miss Linbridge was in a railway accident with it. Miss Linbridge—Lord Silverdale."

The Honorary Trier bowed.

"Oh, what a pity it was an old number," he said. "Miss Linbridge might have had a claim for damages."

"How very ungallant!" said Lillie. "Miss Linbridge could have had no claim unless she had been killed."

"Besides," added Miss Linbridge, laughing at Lillie's bull, "it wasn't an old number *then*. The accident happened on New Year's Day."

"Even then it would have been too old," answered Silverdale, "for it is dated December 2, and the assurance policy is only valid during the week of issue."

"What is that?" gasped Miss Linbridge. Her face was passing through a variety of shades.

"Yes," said Lillie; "here is the condition in print. You don't seem to have noticed it was a back number. But of course I don't wonder at that—there's no topical interest whatever; one week's issue is very much like another. And see! why, there is even 'Specimen Copy' marked on the outside sheet. Richard's uncle must have had it given to him in the street."

"The miracle!" exclaimed Miss Linbridge, in exultant tones, and, repossessing herself of the paper, she darted from the Club.

CHAPTER XIX

LA FEMME INCOMPRISE

Lord Silverdale had gone, and there was now no need for Lillie to preserve the factitious cheerfulness with which she had listened to his usual poem, while her thoughts were full of other and even more depressing things. Margaret Linbridge's miracle had almost undermined the President's faith in the steadfastness of her sex; she turned mentally to the yet unaccepted Wee Winnie for consolation, condemning her own half-hearted attitude towards that sturdy soul, and almost persuading herself that salvation lay in spats. At any rate, long skirts seemed the last things in the world to find true women in.

But Providence had not exhausted its miracles, and Lillie was not to spend a miserable afternoon. The miracle was speeding along towards her on the the top of an omnibus—a miracle of beauty and smartness. On reaching the vicinity of the Old Maids' Club, the miracle, which was of course of the female gender, tapped the driver amicably upon the hat with her parasol, and said, "Stop, please." The polite creature was the spirit of self-help itself, and scorned the aid of the gentleman in front of her, preferring to knock off his hat and crush the driver's, so long as the independence of womanhood was maintained. But she maintained it charmingly and without malice, and gave the conductor a sweet smile in addition to his fare, as she tripped away to the Old Maids' Club.

Lillie was fascinated the instant Turple the Magnificent announced "Miss Wilkins," in suave tones; the mere advent of a candidate raised her spirits, and she found herself chatting freely with her even before she had put her through the catechism. But the catechism came at last.

"Why do *I* want to join you?" asked the miracle. "Because I am disgusted with my lover; because I am a *femme incomprise.* Oh, don't stare at me as if I were a medley of megrims and fashionable ailments; I'm the very opposite of that. Mine is a buoyant, breezy, healthy nature, straightforward and simple. That's why I complain of being misunderstood. My lover is a poet, and the misunderstanding I have to endure at his hands is something appalling. Every man is a bit of a poet where woman is concerned, and so every woman is more or less misunderstood; but when you are unfortunate enough to excite the affection of a real whole poet—well, that way madness lies. Your words are twisted into meanings you never intended, your motives are misconstrued, and your simplest actions are distorted. Silverplume—for it is the well-known author of *Poems of Compassion* that I have had the misfortune to captivate—never calls without laying a sonnet next day, in

AMICABLY SAID, "STOP, PLEASE."

which remarks that must be most misleading to those who do not know me occur with painful frequency. His allowance is two kisses per day—one of salutation, one of farewell. We have only been actually engaged two months, yet I have counted up three hundred and thirty-nine distinct and separate kisses in the voluminous *Sonnet Series* which he has devoted to our engagement; and, what is worse, he describes himself as depositing them

> Where at thy flower-mouth exiguous
> The purple passion mantles to the brim.

"It sounds as if I were be-rouged like a dowager. Purple passion, indeed! I let him kiss me because he appears to like it and because there seems something wrong about it,—but as for really caring a pin one way or another, well, you, Miss Dulcimer, know how much there is in that! This *Sonnet Series* promises to be endless; the course of our acquaintanceship is depicted in its most minute phases with the most elaborate inaccuracy; if I smile, if I say 'How do you do?' if I put my hand to my forehead, if I look into the fire, down go fourteen lines,—giving a whole world of significance to my meanest actions, and making Himalayas out of the most microscopic molehills. I am credited with thoughts I never dreamed of and sentiments I never felt, till I ask myself whether any other woman was ever so cruelly misunderstood as I. I grow afraid to do or say anything, lest I bring upon my head a new sonnet. But even so, I cannot help *looking* something or the other; and when I come to read the sonnet, I find it is always the other. Once I refused to see him for a whole week, but that only resulted in seven *Sonnets of Absence*, imaginatively depicting what I was saying and doing each day, and containing a detailed analysis of his own sensations, as well as reminiscences of past happy hours together. Most of them I had no recollection of, and the only one I could at all identify was that of a morning we spent on the Ramsgate cliffs, where Silverplume put his handkerchief over his face and fell asleep.

"In the last lines of the sonnet it came out:

There, 'mid the poppies of the planisphere,
I swooned for very joy and wearihead.

"But I knew it by the poppies. Then, dear Miss Dulcimer, you should just see the things he calls me, 'Love's gonfalon and lodestar,' and what-not. Very often I cannot even find them in the dictionary, and it makes me uneasy. Heaven knows what he may be saying about me! When he talks of

The rack of unevasive lunar things,

I do not so much complain, because it's their concern if they are libelled. It is different with incomprehensible remarks flung unmistakeably at my own head, such as

O chariest of Caryatides.

It sounds like a reproach, and I should like to know what I have done to deserve it. And then his general remarks are so monotonously unintelligible. One of his longest poetical epistles, which is burnt into my memory, because I had to pay twopence for extra postage, began with this lament:

O sweet are roses in the summer time,
And Indian naiads' weary walruses,
And yet to-morrow never comes to-day.

"I cannot see any way out of it all, except by breaking off our engagement. When we were first engaged, I don't deny I rather liked being written about in lovely-sounding lines, but it is a sweet one is soon surfeited with, and Silverplume has raved about me to that extent, that he has made me look ridiculous in the eyes of all my friends. If he had been moderate, they would have been envious; now they laugh when they read of my wonderful charms, of my lithe snake's mouth, and my face which shames the sun, and my Epipsychidiontic eyes (whatever that may be), and my

Wee waist that holds the cosmos in its span,

and say he is poking fun at me. But Silverplume is quite serious,—I am sure of that; and it is the worst feature of the case. He carries on just the same in conversation, with the most improper allusions to heathen goddesses, and seems really to believe that I am absorbed in the sunset when I am thinking what to wear to-morrow. Just to give you an idea of how he misinterprets my silence, let me read to you one of his sonnets, called

MOONSHINE

Walking a space betwixt the double Naught,—
  The What Is Bound To Be and What Has Been,—
  How sweet with Thee beneath the moonlit treen,
O woman-soul immaculately wrought,
To sit and catch a harmony uncaught
  Within a world that mocks with margarine,
  In chastened silence, mystic, epicene,
Exchanging incommunicable thought.

Diana! Death may doom and Time may toss,
  And sundry other kindred things occur,
But Hell itself can never turn to loss,
  Though Mephistopheles his stumps should stir,
That day, when introduced at Charing-Cross,
  I smiled and doffed my silken cylinder.

"Another distressing feature about Silverplume—indeed, I think about all men—is the continuous capacity for love-making. You know, my dear Miss Dulcimer, with us it is a matter of times and seasons,—we are creatures of strange and subtle susceptibilities, sometimes we are in the mood for love, and ready to respond to all shades of sentimentality, but at other moments (and these the majority) men's amorous advances jar horribly. Men do not know this. Ever ready to make love themselves, they think all moments are the same to us as to them. And of all men, poets are the most prepared to make love at a moment's notice. So that Silverplume himself is almost more trying than his verses."

"But, after all, you need not read them!" observed Lillie. "They please him and they do not hurt you. And you have always the consolation of remembering it is not you he loves, but the paragon he has evolved from his inner consciousness. Even taking into account his personal affectionateness, your reason for refusing him seems scarcely strong enough."

"Ah, wait a moment, you have not heard the worst! I might perhaps have tolerated his metrical misinterpretations,—indeed, on my sending him a vigorous protest against the inaccuracies of his last collection (they came out so much more glaringly when brought all together from the various scattered publications to which Silverplume originally contributed them), he sent me back a semi-apologetic explanation, thus conceived:

TO CELIA

You know, of course, my name is Diana, but that is his way.

'Tis not alone thy sweet eyes' gleam,
  Nor sunny glances,
For which I weave so oft a dream
  Of dainty fancies.

'Tis not alone thy witching play
  Of grace fantastic,
That makes me chant so oft a lay
  Encomiastic.

Both editors and thee I see,
  Thy face, their purses;
I offer heart and soul to thee,
  To them, my verses.

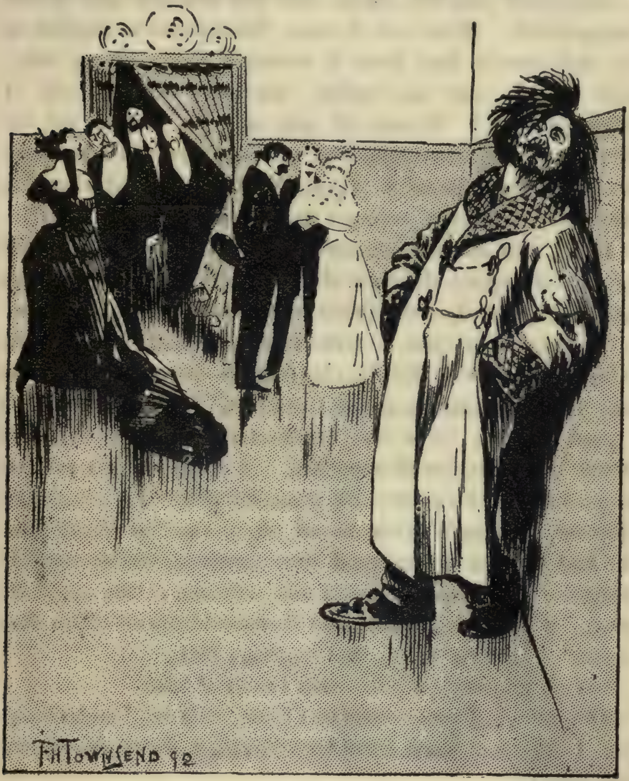
"I was partially mollified by this, for if his poems were not merely complimentary, and he really got paid for them, one might put up with inspiring them. We were reconciled, and he took me to a reception at the house of a wealthy friend of his, a fellow-member of the Sonneteers' Society. It was here that I saw a sight that froze my young blood, and warned me upon the edge of what a precipice I was standing. When we got into the drawing-room, the first thing we saw was an awful apparition in a corner—a hideous unkempt unwashed man in a dressing-gown and slippers, with his eyes rolling wildly and his lips moving rhythmically. It was the host."

"'Don't speak to him,' whispered the hostess. 'He doesn't see us. He has been like that all day. He came down to look to the decorations this morning, when the idea took him, and he has been glued to the spot ever since. He has forgotten all about the reception. He doesn't know we're here, and I thought it best not to disturb him till he is safely delivered of the sonnet.'

"'You are quite right!' everybody said, in sympathetic awe-struck tones, and left a magic circle round the poet in labour.

"But I felt a shudder run through my whole being. "'Goodness gracious, Silverplume,' I said, 'is this the way you poets go on?'

"'No, no, Diana,' he answered me. 'It is all tommy-rot.' (I quote Silverplume's words.) 'The beggar is just bringing out a new volume; and although his wife has distributed the most lavish hospitality to the critics, he has never been able to get himself taken seriously as a poet. There will be lots



THE POET PLAYS HIS LAST CARD.

of critics here to-night, and he is playing his last card. If he is not a genius now, he never will be.'

"'Of course,' I replied sceptically. 'Two of a trade!' I made him take me away, and that was the end of our engagement. Even as it was, Silverplume's neglect of his appearance had been a constant thorn in my side; and if this was so before marriage, what could I hope for after? It was all very well for him to say his friend was only shamming, but even so, how did I know he would not be reduced to that sort of thing himself when his popularity faded and younger rivals came along.'"

Lillie, who seemed to have some *arrière-pensée*, entered into an animated defence of the poet; but Miss Wilkins stood her ground, and refused to withdraw her candidature.

"I don't want you to withdraw your candidature," said Lillie frankly. "I shall be charmed to entertain it. I am only arguing upon the general question."

And, indeed, Lillie was enraptured with Miss Wilkins. It was the attraction of opposites. A matter-of-fact woman who could reject a poet's love appealed to her with irresistible piquancy. Miss Wilkins stayed on to tea (by which time she had become Diana), and they gossiped on all sorts of subjects, and Lillie gave her the outlines of the queerest stories of past candidates; and in the Old Maids' Club that afternoon all went merry as a marriage bell.

"Well, good-bye, Lillie," said Diana at last.

"Good-bye, Diana," returned Lillie. "Now *I* understand you, I hope you won't consider yourself a *femme incomprise* any longer."

"It is only the men I complain of, dear."

"But we must ever remain *incomprises* by man," said Lillie. "*Femme incomprise*—why, it is the badge of all our sex."

"Yes," answered Diana; "a woman letting down her back hair is tragic to a man; to us she only recalls bedroom gossip. Good-bye.' And, nodding brightly, the brisk little creature sallied into the street and captured a passing bus.

CHAPTER XX

THE INAUGURAL SOIRÉE

"OH LORD SILVERDALE," cried Lillie exultantly, when he made his usual visit the next afternoon. "At last I have an unexceptionable candidate. We shall get under weigh at last. I am so pleased, because papa keeps bothering about that inaugural *soirée.* You know he is staying in town expressly for it. But what is the matter?—you don't seem to be glad at my news."

"I am afraid you will be grieved at mine," he replied gravely. "Look at this in to-day's *Moon.*"

Sobered by his manner, she took the paper. Then her face grew white. She read, in large capitals:

"*THE OLD MAIDS' CLUB*

"*INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT*

"*SENSATIONAL STORIES OF SKITTISH SPINSTERS*

"*WEE WINNIE AND LILLIE DULCIMER.*

"I called at the Old Maids' Club yesterday," writes a *Moon* woman, "to get some wrinkles, which ought to be abundant in such a Club, though they are not. Miss Dulcimer, the well-known authoress, is one of the loveliest and jolliest girls of the day. Of course, I went as a candidate, with a trumped-up story about my unhappy past, which Miss Dulcimer will, I am sure, forgive me, in view of the fact that it was the only way of making her talk freely for the benefit of my readers."

Lillie's eye glanced rapidly down the collection of distortions. Then she dropped the *Moon.* "This is outrageous," she said; "I can never forgive her."

"Why, is this the candidate you were telling me about?" asked Silverdale, in deeper concern.

"I am afraid it is," said Lillie, almost weeping. "I took to her so; we talked ever so long. Even Wee Winnie did not possess the material for all these inaccuracies."

"What is the woman's name?"

"Wilkins—I already called her Diana."

"Diana?" cried Silverdale. "Wilkins? Great heavens, can it be?"

"What is the matter?"

"It must be. Wilkins has married his Diana. It was Mrs. Diana Wilkins who called upon you—not Miss at all."

"What *are* you talking about? Who are these people?"

"Don't you remember Wilkins, the *Moon* man, that I was up in a balloon with? He was in a frightful quandary then about his approaching marriage. He did not know what to do. It tortured him to hear any one ask a question, because he was always interviewing people, and he got to hate the very sound of an interrogation. I told you about it at the time, don't you remember? And he knew that marriage would bring into his life a person who would be sure to ask him questions after business hours. I was very sorry for the man, and tried to think of a way out, but in vain; and I even promised him to bring the Old Maids'

Club under the notice of his Diana. Now it seems he has hit on the brilliant solution of making her into a Lady Interviewer, so that her nerves, too, shall be hypersensitive to interrogatives, and husband and wife shall sit at home in a balsamic restfulness permeated by none but categorical propositions. Ah me, well, I envy them!"

"You envy them?" said Lillie.

"Why not? They are well matched."

"But you are as happy as Wilkins, surely."

"Query. It takes two to find Happiness."

"What nonsense!" said Lillie.

She had been already so upset by the treachery and loss of the misunderstood Diana, that she felt ready to break down and shed hot tears over these heretical sentiments of Silverdale's. He had been so good, so patient. Why should he show the cloven hoof just to-day?

"Miss Dolly Vane," announced Turple the Magnificent.

A strange apparition presented itself—an ancient lady, quaintly attired. Her dress fell in voluminous folds—the curious frill skirt was bordered with velvet, and there were huge lace frills on the elbow sleeves. Her hair was smoothed over her ears, and she wore a Leghorn hat. A little striped shawl covered her shoulders. There were the remains of beauty on her withered face, but her eyes were wild and wandering.

She curtseyed to the couple with old-fashioned grace, and took the chair which Lord Silverdale handed her.

Lillie looked at her inquiringly.

"Have I the pleasure of speaking to Miss Dulcimer?" said the old lady. Her tones were cracked and quavering.

"I am Miss Dulcimer," replied Lillie. "What can I do for you?"

"Ah yes. I have been reading about you in the *Moon* to-day. Wee Winnie and Lillie Dulcimer! Wee Winnie! It reminds me of myself. They call me Little Dolly, you know." She simpered in a ghastly manner.

Lillie's face was growing pale. She could not speak.

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THE OLD MAID ARRIVES.

"Yes, yes, of course," said Silverdale, smiling, "they call you Little Dolly."

"Little Dolly!" she repeated to herself, mumbling and chuckling. "Little Dolly!"

"So you have been reading about Miss Dulcimer?" said Silverdale pleasantly.

"Yes, yes," said the old lady, looking up with a start. "Little Lillie Dulcimer, foundress of the Old Maids' Club. That's the thing for me, I thought to myself. That'll punish Philip. That'll punish him for being away so long. When he comes home and finds Little Dolly is an Old Maid, won't he be sorry, poor Philip! But I can't help it. I said I would punish him, and I will."

All the blood had left Lillie's cheek—she trembled and caught hold of Lord Silverdale's arm.

"I shan't have you now, Philip," the creaking tones of the old lady continued, after a pause. "The rules will not allow it, will they, Miss Dulcimer? It is not enough that I am young and beautiful, I must reject somebody—and I have nobody else to reject but you, Philip. You are the only man I have ever loved. Oh my Philip! My poor Philip!"

She began to wring her hands. Lillie pressed closer to Lord Silverdale, and her grasp on his arm tightened.

"Very well, we shall put your name on the books at once," said the Honorary Trier, in bluff hearty tones.

Little Dolly looked up smiling. "Then I'm an Old Maid?" she cried ecstatically. "Already! Little Dolly an Old Maid! Already! Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!"

She went off into a burst of uncanny laughter. Lord Silverdale felt Lillie shuddering violently. He disengaged himself from her grasp and placed her on the sofa. Then, offering his arm to Miss Dolly Vane, who accepted it with a charming smile and a curtsey to Miss Dulcimer, he led her from the apartment.

When he returned Lillie was weeping half-hysterically on the sofa.

"My darling!" he whispered, "calm yourself."

He laid his hand tenderly on her hair. Presently the sobs ceased.

"Oh Lord Silverdale!" she said, in a shaken voice, "how good you are! Poor old lady! Poor old lady!"

"Do not distress yourself. I have taken care that she shall get home safely."

"Little Dolly! How tragic it was!" whispered Lillie.

"Yes, it was tragic. Probably it is not now so sad to her as it is to us, but it is tragic enough, Heaven knows. Lillie"—he trembled as he addressed her thus for the first time—"I am not sorry this has happened. The time has come to put an end to all this make-believe. This Old Maids' Club of yours is a hollow mockery. You are playing round the fringes of tragedy—it is like warming your hands at a house on fire, wherein wretched beings are shrieking for help. You are young and rich and beautiful. Heaven pity the women who have none of these charms. Life is a cruel tragedy for many—never crueller than when its remorseless laws condemn gentle loving women to a crabbed and solitary old age. To some all the smiles of fortune, the homage of all mankind—to others all the frowns of fate, and universal neglect aggravated by contumely. You have felt this, I know, and it is as a protest that you conceived your Club. Still, can it ever be a serious success? I love you, Lillie, and you have known it all along. If I have entered into the joke, believe me I have sometimes taken it as seriously as you. Come! Say you love me, too, and let us end the tragi-comedy."

Lillie was obstinately silent a moment; then she dried her eyes, and with a wan little smile said, in tones which she vainly strove to render those of the usual formula, "What poem have you brought me to-day?"

"To-day I have brought no poem, though I have lived one," said Lord Silverdale, taking her soft unresisting hand. "But, like Lady Clara Vere de Vere, you put strange memories in my head, and I will tell you some verses I made in the country in my callow youth when the world was new."

PASTORAL

A rich-toned landscape touched with darkling gold-
  Of misty, throbbing corn-fields, and with haze
Of softly-tinted hills and dreamy wold,
  Lies warm with raiment of soft summer rays,
And in the magic air there lives a free
And subtle feeling of the distant sea.

The perfect day slips softly to its end,
  The sunset paints the tender evening sky,
The shadows shroud the hills with grey, and lend
  A softened touch of ancient mystery;
And ere the silent change of heaven's light
I feel the coming glory of the night.

Oh for the sweet and sacred earnest gaze
  Of eyes divine with strange and yearning tears,
To feel with me the beauty of our days,
  The glorious sadness of our mortal years;
The noble misery of the spirit's strife,
The joy and splendour of the body's life.

Lillie's hand pressed her lover's with involuntary tenderness, but she had turned her face away. Presently she murmured, "But think what you are asking me to do. How can I, the President of the Old Maids' Club, be the first recreant?"

"But you are also the last to leave the ship," he replied smilingly. "Besides, you are not legally elected. You never came before the Honorary Trier. You were never a member at all, so have nothing to undo. If you had stood your trial fairly, I should have plucked you, my Lillie; plucked you and worn you nearest my heart. It is I who have a position to resign—the Honorary Triership—and I resign it instanter. A nice trying time I have had, to be sure!"

"Now, now! I set my face against punning!" said Lillie, showing it now, for the smiles had come to hide the tears.

"Pardon, Rainbow," he answered.

"Why do you call me Rainbow?"

"Because you look it," he said. "Because your face is made of sunshine and tears. Go and look in the glass. Also because—well, wait and I will fashion my other reasons into a rhyme, and send it to you on our wedding morn."

"Poetry made while you wait," said Lillie, laughing. The laugh suddenly froze on her lips, and a look of horror overswept her face.

"What is it, dearest?" cried her lover, in alarm.

"Wee Winnie! How can we face Wee Winnie?"

"There is no need to break the truth to her; we can simply get rid of her by telling her she has never been elected, and never will be."

"Why," said Lillie, with a comic *moue*, "that would be harder to tell her than the truth. But we must first of all tell father. I am afraid he will be dreadfully disappointed at missing that inaugural *soirée* after all. I told you he has been staying in town expressly for it. We have some bad quarters of an hour before us."

They sought the millionaire in his sanctum, but found him not. They inquired of Turple the Magnificent, and learnt that he was in the garden. As they turned away, the lovers both simultaneously remarked something peculiar about the face of Turple the Magnificent. Moved by a common impulse, they turned back and gazed at it. For some seconds they could not at all grasp the change that had come over it, but at last, and almost at the same instant, they realised what was the matter.

Turple the Magnificent was smilimg.

Filled with strange apprehensions, Silverdale and Lillie hurried into the garden, where their vague alarm was exchanged for definite consternation. The millionaire was pacing the gravel paths in the society of a strange and beautiful lady. On closer inspection, the lady turned out to be only too familiar.

"Why, it's Wee Winnie masquerading as a woman!" exclaimed Lord Silverdale.

And so it proved—Nelly Nimrod in all the flush of her womanly beauty, her mannish attire discarded.

"Why, what is this, father?" murmured Lillie.

"My child," said the millionaire solemnly, "as *you* have resolved to be an Old Maid, I—I—well, I thought it only *my* duty to marry. Even the poorest millionaire cannot shirk the responsibilities of wealth."

"But, father!" said Lillie, in dismay, "I have changed my mind. I am going to marry Lord Silverdale."

"Bless ye, my children!" said the millionaire. "You are a woman, Lillie, and it is a woman's privilege to change her mind. But I am a man and have no such privilege. I must marry all the same."

"But Miss Nimrod has changed her mind too," said Lillie, quite losing her temper. "And *she* is not a woman."

"Gently, gently," said the millionaire. "Respect your stepmother to be, if you have no respect for my future wife."

"Lillie," said Miss Nimrod appealingly, "do not misjudge me. I have *not* changed my mind."

"But you said you could never marry, on the ground that while you would only marry an unconventional man, an unconventional man wouldn't want to marry you."

"Well? Your father *is* the man I sought. He *didn't* want to marry me," she explained frankly.

"Oh," said Lillie, taken utterly aback, and regarding her father commiseratingly.

"It is true," he said, laughing uneasily. "I fell in love with Wee Winnie, but now Nelly says she wants to settle down."

"You ought to be grateful to me, Lillie," added Nelly, "for it was solely in the interests of the Old Maids' Club that I consented to marry your father. He was always a danger to the Club; at any moment he might have put forth autocratic authority, and wound it up. So I thought that by marrying him I should be able to influence him in its favour."

"No doubt you *will* make him see the desirability of women remaining old maids," retorted Lillie, unappeased.

"Come, come, Lillie! be sensible!" said the millionaire. "Nelly, you shall give Lillie a good dinner at the Junior Widows', one of those charming dinners you and I have had there. And, Lillie, please send out the cards for the inaugural *soirée*. I am not going to be done out of that, and nothing can now be gained by delay."

"But, sir, how can we inaugurate a Club which has never had any members?" asked Silverdale.

"What does that matter? Aren't there plenty of candidates without them? Besides, nobody'll know. Each of the candidates will think the others are the members. Tell you what, boy, they shall all dance at Lillie's wedding, and we'll make that the inaugural *soirée*."

"But that would be to publish my failure to the world," remonstrated Lillie.

"Nonsense, dear. It'll be published without that. Trust the *Moon*. Isn't it better to take the bull by the horns?"

"Well, yes, perhaps you're right," said Lillie hesitatingly. "But I hope the world will understand that it is only desperation at the collapse of the Old Maids' Club that has driven me to commit matrimony."

She went back to the Club to write out the cards.

"What do you think of my stepmother?" she inquired pathetically of the ex-Honorary Trier.

"What do I think?" said Lord Silverdale seriously. "I think she is the punishment of Providence for your interference with its designs."

. . . .

The explanatory rhyme duly came to hand on Lillie's wedding morning. It was written on vellum in the bridegroom's best hand, and ran:

RAINBOW

Ah, why I call you "Rainbow," sweet?
The shadows 'fore your eyes retreat,
The ground grows light beneath your feet.

You smile in your superior way,
A Rainbow has no feet, you say?
Nay, be not so precise to-day.

Created but to soothe and bless,
You followed logic to excess,
Repressing thoughts of tenderness.

My life was chill and wan and hoary,
You came, the Bow of ancient story
To kiss the greyness into glory.

And now as Rainbow fair to see
A Promise sweet you are to me
Of sorrow nevermore to be.

Besides the friends of the happy pair, nearly all the candidates were present at the inaugural *soirée* of the Old Maids' Club. Not quite all—because Lillie, who was rapidly growing conventional, did not care to have Clorinda Bell, even accompanied by her mother, or by her brother, the Man in the Ironed Mask. Nor did she invite the twins, nor the osculatory Alice. But she conquered her prejudices in other instances, and Frank Maddox, the art critic, came under the convoy of the composer, Paul Horace, and Miss Mary Friscoe was brought by Bertie Smythe. The Writers' Club also sent Ellaline Rand, and an account of the proceedings appeared in the first number of the *Cherub*. The "Princess" was brought by Miss Primpole, and Captain Athelstan and Lord Arthur came together in unimpaired friendship. Eustasia Pallas and her husband, Percy Swinshel Spatt, both their faces full of the peace that passeth understanding, got a night off for the occasion, and came in a hansom paid for out of the week's beer-money. Turple the Magnificent, who had seen them at home in the servants' hall, was outraged in his deepest instincts, and multiplied occasions for offering them refreshments merely for the pleasure of snorting in their proximity. The great Fladpick (Frank Grey), accompanied by his newly-won bride Cecilia, made the evening memorable by the presence of "the English Shakespeare," Guy Fledgely brought Sybil Hotspur, and his father the baronet was under the care of Miss Jack. The lady from Boston wired congratulations on the success of the Club from Yokohama whither she had gone to pick up lacquer-work.

Poor Miss Summerson, the Lovely May, and the Victim of the Valentine were a triad that was much admired. Miss Fanny Radowski, whose oriental loveliness excited due attention, came with Martin. Winifred Woodpecker was accompanied by her mother, the resemblance between the two being generally remarked, and Miss Margaret Linbridge seemed to afford Richard Westbourne copious opportunities for jealousy. Even Wilkins was there with his Diana in an unprofessional capacity, Lillie having relented towards her interviewer on learning that she had been really engaged to Silverplume once, and that she had not entirely drawn on the stores of journalistic fancy. Silverplume himself was present, unconscious to what he owed the invitation, and paying marked attentions to the unattached beauties. Miss Nimrod promenaded the rooms on the arm of the millionaire. She had improved vastly since she had become effeminate, and Lillie felt she could put up with her, now she would not have to live with her. Even Silverdale's aunt, Lady Goody-Goody Twoshoes, could find no fault with Nelly now.

It was a brilliant scene. The apartments of the Old Maids' Club had been artistically decked with the most gorgeous flowers that the millionaire could afford, and the epigrams had been carefully removed so as to leave the rooms free for dancing. As Lillie's father gazed around, he felt that not many millionaires could secure such a galaxy of beauty as circled in the giddy dance in his gilded saloon. It was, indeed, an unexampled gathering of pretty girls—this inaugural *soirée* of the Old Maids' Club, and the millionaire's shirt-front heaved with pride and pleasure, and the latter-day Cupid, that still hung on the wall, seemed to take heart of grace again.

"You got my verses this morning, Rainbow mine?" said Silverdale, when the carriage drove off, and the honeymoon began.

It was almost the first moment they had had together the whole day.

"Yes," said Lillie softly. "And I wanted to tell you there are two lines which are truer than you meant."

"I am indeed a poet, then! Which are they?"

Lillie blushed sweetly. Presently she murmured:

"You followed logic to excess,
Repressing thoughts of tenderness."

"How did you know that?" she asked, her brown eyes looking ingenuously into his.

"Love's divination, I suppose."

"My father didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"About my discovery in the algebra of love."

"Algebra of love?"

"No, of course he didn't. I don't suppose he ever really understood it," said Lillie, with a pathetic smile. "I think I ought to tell you now what it was that made me so—so—you understand."

She put her little warm hand lightly into his, and nestled against his shoulder as if to make amends.

After a delicious silence, for Lord Silverdale betrayed no signs of impatience, Lillie confessed all.

"So you see I have loved you all along," she concluded. "Only I did not dare hope that the chance would come to pass, against which the odds were 5998."

"But, great heavens!" cried Lord Silverdale. "Do you mean to say this is why you were so cold to me all those long weary weeks?"

"That is the only reason," faltered Lillie. "But would you have had me defy the probabilities?"

"No, no—of course not, I wouldn't dream of such a thing. But you have miscalculated them!"

"Miscalculated them?"

Lillie began to tremble violently.

"Yes, there is a fallacy in your ratiocination."

"A fallacy!" she whispered hoarsely.

"Yes, you have calculated on the theory that the probabilities are independent, whereas they are interdependent. In the algebra of love this is the typical class of probabilities. The two events—your falling in love with me, my falling in love with you—are related; they are not absolutely isolated phenomena, as you have superficially assumed. It is our common qualities which make us gravitate together, and what makes me love you is the same thing that makes you love me. Thus the odds against our loving each other are immensely less than you have ciphered out. Even on your own assumption they should be 5999 to one, not 5998, but as the whole assumption is radically vicious, it is scarce worth while to point out your error of manipulation."

Lillie had fallen back, huddled up, in her corner of the carriage, her face covered with her hands.

"Forgive me," said Lord Silverdale penitently. "I had no right to correct your mathematics on your wedding-day. Say two and two are six and I will make it so."

"Two and two are not six and you know it," said Lillie firmly, raising her wet face. "It is I who have to ask forgiveness for being so cruel to you. But if I have sinned, I have sinned in ignorance. You will believe that, dearest?"

"I will believe anything that comes from my Rainbow's lips," said Lord Silverdale. "Why! they are quite white! Let me kiss them rosy again."

Like a naughty child that has been chastened by affliction, she held up her face obediently to meet his. The lips were already blushing.

"But confess," she said, while an arch indefinable light came into the brown eyes,—"confess we have had a most original courtship!"

Printed by T. and A. Constable, Printers to Her Majesty
at the Edinburgh University Press.

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